

PLUCK AND LUCK

COMPLETE STORIES OF ADVENTURE.

Issued Weekly—By Subscription \$2.50 per year. Entered as Second Class Matter at the New York Post Office, by Frank Tousey.

No. 45.

NEW YORK, APRIL 12, 1899.

Price 5 Cents.

THE WOLF HUNTERS OF MINNESOTA.

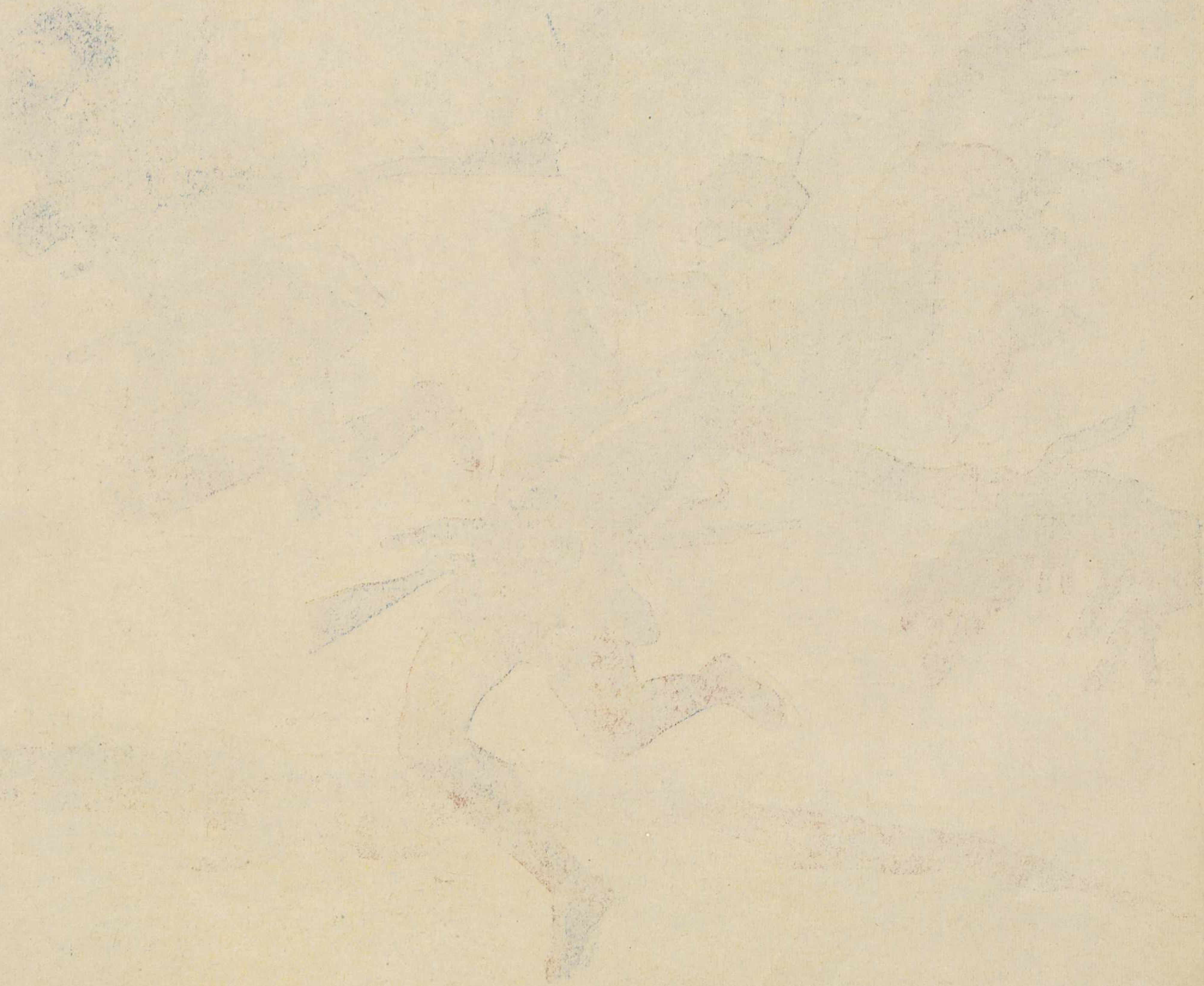
BY JAS. C. MERRITT.



As the men spring into the air, a wolf—the biggest and fiercest of all—leaps after them. Oh! the brute has landed upon the back of one of the men and fastened its teeth in the fur collar of his coat.

THE HISTORY OF THE

REIGN OF



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THE WOLF HUNTERS OF MINNESOTA.

BY JAS. C. MERRITT.

CHAPTER I.

THE WAYFARER AND THE WOLVES.

R-R-R-AGH!

What sound is that which breaks the stillness of the wintry night, and sends a cold shiver down the listener's spine, freezing the very marrow in his bones.

Gr-r-r-ugh!

How it startles the very echoes from their sleep in the deep wood, where the snow lies so thick and white.

How it repeats itself from the bleak hillsides, the distant mountains, and even the frozen waters of the river.

What is it?

R-rugh, r-r-agh, rugh!

The bark of a dog?

No, it is not that, though it has a similar sound, for there is something more wild, more unearthly in the short, sharp notes, cutting upon the crisp air, than the bark of so domestic an animal as a dog.

There is not that generous volume of sound that is heard in the latter, but more spitefulness, more of the uncanny element, if I may say so.

The bark of a dog seldom terrifies one when heard at the distance whence this sound comes.

There is something awful in this barking, however, and to one who has heard it it brings a sense of fear, or of nervousness, at all events.

Well may he who hears it make all haste towards his cozy home and warm fireside, if he is near them, for the sound bodes no good.

Well may he shudder, too, if the night finds him far from home, and his path leads him through the woods or along the hillsides whence sounds again that unearthly cry, this time followed by a prolonged howl.

It were better for him were he not abroad this night, for the wind is fresh and the moon shines in full splendor from a nearly cloudless sky, making all things, snow-covered hills, dark green forests and ice-bound rivers, resplendent in its silver beams.

Again that horrid sound, and nearer than ever, too, as if the animal that had uttered it—for it must be an animal—had scented something, and the wind to-night can carry a scent a long distance.

Gr-r-r-agh!

There is no mistaking that sharp, snapping, guttural sound now, even by one who had never heard it.

It is the bark of a wolf.

No wonder that he who hears it trembles, and hastens his steps toward the river, across which, nestled in a little valley, is the cozy home which never before had the attractions for him that it has to-night.

The wolves of the woods and mountains, made more ravenous by the rigors of a northern winter, are not pleasant companions, particularly when there is one man to a pack of the snarling, howling demons.

There is more than a single bark, more than a single howl, now, the hillside resounding with the fear-inspiring notes.

The wolves, called together by the cry of their leader—a gaunt, gray, half-starved devil, in the guise of an animal, his fiery eyes and red tongue giving strength to this belief—are already on the track of the benighted traveler, and seemed to anticipate a dainty feast.

The man has noticed, a few minutes before, say from five to ten, a skulking figure stealing along the path at some little distance from him, keeping pace with him, and seeming to watch him suspiciously; but he has not thought much of the circumstance.

As he emerges from the wood the attendant figure suddenly disappears, and he thinks it is nothing but a shadow which he has seen after all.

He is a stranger to the woods and mountains of Minnesota if he thinks that, and does not know that a wolf has been following him, and has now scampered off to call his fellows, fearing to attack the man alone.

He is not altogether a stranger, either, having lived in that little snug cabin of his for two years, but his thoughts are busy with other things to-night, and he does not dream of wolves.

Suddenly that single bark arouses him to a sense of his danger, and the whole situation is clear before his eyes.

Ere long that cry will be repeated by a hundred wolfish throats, and the gray demons will be upon him.

He is yet a mile from his home, and he has the river to cross, a perfect glaze of ice now, on account of the recent thaw and the sudden freezing of the water upon its surface.

And yet the river must be crossed to reach his home, albeit the wolves will rush across it more swiftly than he, with his fear of falling and breaking an arm or a leg.

The barking and howling and snarling come nearer and nearer yet, and still that snug little home has not been reached, and perhaps never will be.

The traveler has a rifle and ammunition; but what can one man do against a pack of wolves?

If the worst comes, he might climb a tree and fire upon them from this place of refuge until the morning, when he will be safe; for there are settlements near, and the creatures will not remain near them during the day.

The night is bitterly cold, and there is danger of his freezing to death and falling from his perch should he try that last expedient.

No; he must push on and try to reach his home, and in sight of which he can summon assistance, and drive the snarling pack hence.

He breathes a silent prayer that his strength may last him for that time and enable him to keep ahead of his foes, and then he comes within sight of the river, one of the largest streams of northern Minnesota, where the scene of this story is located.

He rushes down the bank, strikes the ice squarely, and slides with great velocity for a distance of at least twenty feet.

Then he turns at right angles and strikes out for downstream, the path leading to his house being half a mile distant.

If he had a pair of skates now how quickly would he distance the bloodthirsty fiends, now rushing on at a fearful pace, intent upon his doom.

He can slide at all events, the ice being as smooth as a polished mirror, and that will greatly assist him.

He takes a short run and then putting his left foot forward, a peculiarity of his own, begins the slide, with the wind behind him now instead of in front.

The wind, besides impelling him forward more rapidly, serves him another purpose, that of carrying the scent from instead of towards the wolves.

He has struck the river at this point on that very account, though the other way would have been nearer, the hope of cheating the wolves of their prey by strategy rather than physical strength, inspiring him to try the trick.

He slides along the glittering surface with great rapidity, seeming to distance the wind itself, and a smile of deep satisfaction overspread his handsome face.

He is a man of good appearance, tall and well proportioned, finely built, being neither fat nor thin, but yet possessing a goodly amount of hard, solid flesh, just the thing needed in the severe winters of this country.

He is full-bearded and wears his hair rather long, is about twenty-four or five years of age, an American by birth and breeding, and is known in the neighborhood where he has lived some two years with his wife and little son by the name of Mark Carrington.

Suddenly he hears a cry which startles him more than any he had heard to-night.

The cry of a wolf!

Yes.

It is above him, however, and not below, consequently the creatures will scent him out.

He realizes his danger in a second.

The pack has spread itself out, upon reaching the river, and some have gone up and some downstream in order to prevent his possible escape.

"Good God! is there, then, no hope?" he cries in despair.

Wolves above and wolves below, what hope is there for him?

"I must cross here," he mutters, "and take to the woods again. Better to freeze to death than to be torn to pieces by those ravenous devils."

He strikes out toward the opposite shore, handling himself well upon the ice, for it will not do to slip now when so much is at stake.

Hark!

The wolves again?

Yes.

He has heard the sound before, why should he tremble?

Because these new cries come from a different quarter.

That quarter is the stretch of woods directly in front of him.

He is hemmed in by the rapacious monsters!

Death literally stares him in the face!

"I am doomed!" he mutters. "If worse comes to worst, I will end my suffering myself."

He draws his keen bladed hunting knife, and smiles grimly at its sharp edge.

He has but to draw that fine, sharp surface across his throat, near his right ear, and then towards his chin, to be released forever from the troubles of this life.

The howls now resound upon all sides, and he can see the glistening eyes of the demons upon either bank.

What is that he hears?

The voice of a man shouting defiance to the wolves.

There is help at hand then!

He turns to look whence comes the sound, and striking a little unequally in the ice, loses his balance and falls heavily upon his back.

In a moment the wolves will be upon him.

"If I come at all, but I think they will ask me to stay. At any rate, I shall take an extra pair of skates for Doc."

"You'd better stay if you can, for the night is bitter cold."

"I shan't mind that when I am flying over the ice with the wind whistling about my ears. The ice is just like glass, except by 'the springs.'"

"You won't try to skate by that dangerous place?"

"No, mother. Now, good-night, and if I don't come home, you need not worry."

"Good-night, Kit, and God bless you."

He had more need of his mother's blessing that night than ever before in his life.

Clifford King, commonly called Kit, was a handsome young fellow of eighteen or nineteen, strong, muscular, hardy, with a constitution of steel, nerves like iron, and heart of gold.

He was a wolf hunter by occupation, and supported his aged mother and a sister a year or so younger than himself, by the money he made thereby.

At the time of our story the government of Minnesota offered a bounty upon the scalps of wolves of fifty cents apiece, in order to exterminate the fierce creatures, portions of the State being literally infested with them.

Kit hunted the animals for their scalps in common with most of the men of the neighborhood, there being a hot rivalry between them as to who could collect the most within a given time.

So plentiful were the wolves in the less thickly settled districts, that it was not safe for a man to go alone into the deeper woods even by daylight, and many a poor fellow had lost his life by not observing proper caution in that respect.

Parties of five or six, or even a round dozen, had been attacked by the famished brutes, and only after a severe struggle had they driven the enemy away, after having killed a score or more.

The winter, during which this story begins, was an exceptionally severe one, and the wolves, driven mad by hunger, had increased in voracity to an alarming extent; their depredations costing the farmers and cattle raisers many hundreds of dollars.

Besides the loss in live stock, the men killed by the savage animals had increased in number far beyond the average, and, if something were not done to prevent it, there was danger of the district being depopulated.

The oldest, bravest, strongest and best shots among the male population leagued themselves together, and began a war of extermination against the dreaded foe.

Kit belonged to this band of wolf hunters, and was reckoned as sure a shot and as intrepid as any man among them, although there were many older than he.

The appointment that Kit had upon this particular night was to go to the house of a neighbor some ten miles down the river, where there was a merry-making.

There was to be a skating match, and Kit would be one of the contestants, being considered as good a skater for his age as there was anywhere around.

Kit had a friend called Doc Whitford, the two being regular cronies, hunting in company, belonging to the same set, and were doing their courtship in partnership, as it were.

Both young men had sisters, and Doc was as fond of Kit's sister Nellie as Kit admired Susie Whitford, the arrangement being a pleasant one all around and very convenient.

Kit was satisfied to have Doc for a brother, and Doc was equally pleased upon his part to have Kit come into the family as the husband of Susie, an event which was likely enough to happen one of those days.

Doc had no skates, or at least not a good pair, and Kit had promised to take him an extra pair of his own, which were in excellent condition and newly sharpened.

When Kit reached the river it was night, but the full moon made all the landscape radiant, and he needed no other light.

He had his rifle with him and a keen knife besides, for he well knew the danger of being out alone after nightfall, and went prepared.

Buckling on his skates firmly, and drawing his fur cap closer upon his head, Kit takes one or two strides, until getting out upon the smooth ice, when he strikes out vigorously, the sharp blades of his

CHAPTER II.

KIT AND HIS MOTHER.

"GOOD-NIGHT, mother."

"Good-night, Kit. You'll be home early?"

skates ringing upon the ice, when away he dashes down the stream, the wind helping him considerably by being at his back.

As he glides away he hears a sharp yelp just behind him.

Ah! the wolves have seen him, then, and he must hasten.

"Come on, you hungry wretches," he cries, "if you think you can catch me, it's more than I do, that is all."

GR-R-R-AGH!

The one bark is repeated on the instant, and then comes a chorus of howls, a pattering of feet, the glistening of a score of pairs of fiery eyes, and then the wolves are after him.

Strike out, Kit, for your life, ay, and for another's, strike out!

Away he goes, the wolves yelping worse than ever, for he has distanced them.

A stern chase is a long one, and the brutes have no intention of giving up their prey at this early stage of the pursuit.

They are famished, and can polish the bones of a human being with great pleasure, the more the better. A dozen men would be but a lunch to them.

A few more vigorous strokes and Kit goes scudding down the river at lightning speed, the yelps of the creatures behind him borne distinctly to his ear by the wintry wind.

For awhile he gains, but he dare not hope yet.

The cries have been taken up on all sides, and he knows his peril too well to entertain any feeling of satisfaction until he shall see the twinkling lights of the settlement.

He thinks that every wolf within a hundred miles must have gathered in one place this night, for he hears their yells in front, behind, and upon both sides of the river.

"I am afraid it's a narrow squeak for you, my boy," he says softly to himself as he strikes out more vigorously than ever, seeming to draw fire from the very ice by the swiftness of his movements.

Again and again he hears the yells, and now, as he turns his head and glances back over his broad shoulders, he sees that the half-starved fiends, greedy for human blood, have gained frightfully upon him, their pattering footsteps sounding like a heavy shower of rain.

He shouts with all his might, and bids them catch him if they can, hurling defiance at them in thunder tones.

He hears a cry, not of a wolf, but of a human being, and though it sounds but faintly to his ear, owing to the direction of the wind, he still hears it.

Some one else, then, is in peril, and perhaps it is greater than his.

He strains his eyes, and as he darts a piercing glance down the river, sees something dark lying upon the ice.

It is a man.

He sweeps forward, and in a loud voice fairly shrieks:

"Courage, my friend, courage."

"Is that you, Kit?"

"Yes."

"Help me, for God's sake!"

It is difficult to stop himself, but he dips the sharp edges of his steel heels into the ice, and soon checks his progress, kneeling beside Mark Carrington, whom he has recognized.

The wolves are howling all about the two men, pausing an instant before they make the first rush.

Kit clasps his rifle to his shoulder and fires into the pack, killing one and wounding others.

In a second the dead and wounded animals are torn limb from limb and devoured by their rapacious fellows, the bones being scattered all about in an incredibly short time.

"Are you hurt, Mark?" asked Kit.

"No, only my back."

"No bones broken?"

"No."

"Thank Heaven."

"What shall we do, Kit?"

"Put on these skates. Hurry, as you value your life."

"Give them to me. You are a friend indeed."

"Hurry, hurry, for God's sake! When these shrieking fiends finish their terrible meal they will attack us!"

"Keep them off for two minutes and we may escape."

"Give me your rifle. Stop, go on with your work. I'll take it myself."

He unslips the weapon from the shoulder of Mark, who is just putting on one skate.

Sweeping forward a stride or so, Kit throws up the weapon and sends another charge among the wolves, and with the same deadly effect as before.

Another wolf is killed outright and three or four wounded, owing to their being so close together.

Again the horrid feast begins, and such a snapping and snarling, barking and yelping, fighting and howling was never heard nor seen outside of the infernal regions.

"Are you ready?" says Kit, turning towards Mark.

"Yes," and he stands up.

"Come on, then. Take your rifle, and with me make a dash for the point right in front of us downstream."

"The pack is thinner there?"

"Yes. Are you ready?"

"Ay!"

"Now, then, go! Away with us and the fiend take those snarlings!"

CHAPTER III.

A RACE WITH WOLVES.

WITH a ringing shout the two comrades dashed upon the wolves, swinging their rifles wildly around them.

The yelping, snarling, fighting crew fell back, making a passage for the men, through which they darted at full speed.

None too soon, either, for it closed up behind them again, and the wolves started in hot pursuit.

Like the wind they sped over the smooth ice, Mark gaining fresh courage from Kit's companionship.

On and on, down the frozen river, with the greedy horde behind them, the full light of the glorious moon flooding the whole terrible scene, the men, the wolves, the river, and far away the houses of Kit's friends.

Will they ever be able to reach them?

Faster and faster yet they go, the wind howling and whistling about their heads as if it thought that this was a merry race in which it must join as a matter of course.

They pass the path which Mark has to take to reach his home, but he dare not stop and so goes on, faster than ever, Kit close at hand.

Such a race cannot be kept up forever, and there must be an end to it at last.

The wolves are gaining now, steadily gaining, and even the sanguine Kit cannot deny it.

Such a speed as they have been keeping up for the last hour will tell upon anyone however strong and vigorous, and it is beginning to tell fearfully upon them.

They have not spoken a word for a long time, when suddenly Mark cries out:

"Look!"

Kit looks, and what he sees inspires him with hope.

It is the ruddy glare of a huge bonfire built upon the ice, and as they sweep around a bend in the river it comes into sight.

Suddenly, however, Kit's heart seems to stop beating, for he knows the locality and what there is still before him.

There is another danger to be met, but when once this is passed, they can laugh at the wolves.

"The springs!"

This is what he says, and Mark, understanding him, utters a deep groan.

"On, on!" yells Kit, "we must leap the chasm, though it were fifty feet wide."

Kit's mother had alluded to "the springs," and cautioned him not to go too near the dangerous spot, a promise which he must now break or else lose his life.

There was a place in the river, which they were now approaching, where the water never froze entirely over except in the severest weather, and even then the ice was never strong enough to hold up a man's weight.

The neighbors said that there were warm springs bubbling up from the river bed at that point, which prevented the water from freezing so solidly as it did in other parts.

Hence the spot was called "the springs," though some of the younger members of the community said that it was merely a sudden fall in the water which kept it from freezing.

The gap was never more than fifteen or twenty feet wide, however, and had there been a rapid it would have been wider than that, so that the warm spring theory was the one most held to.

The place was called "the springs," and had been ever since there had been white men in that part of the country, and any attempt to take the name away and substitute another would have been a piece of folly unprecedented in the annals of the State.

Kit saw that the fire had been built upon the further side of the gap, which extended nearly from shore to shore, and was within five hundred feet of the further edge, and already he could see dark forms flitting around it, and almost hear their glad shouts.

A few minutes more and all would be over, either for good or ill, he dared not say which it would be.

"Put forth all your strength, Mark," says Kit. "We must fly over that gap before we are safe."

The moonlight showed them the dark stretch of water between the two masses of glittering ice, and they judged it to be fully twenty feet in width.

They had both practiced jumping on the ice, and Kit had often cleared a distance of fifteen feet without any trouble.

When it became a matter of life and death he would certainly be able to exceed this distance, and particularly now, with the wind in his favor, and with so much headway upon him.

But the wolves were close behind, and he knew not at what moment they might spring upon him.

Some of the number had dropped out of the race, but there were a score or more of the fiercest ones left, and nothing but sheer force of numbers could shake them off.

It was a race between life and death, and the gaunt monster, represented by the wolves, seemed determined to have his own.

"We're on the home stretch!" shouted Kit. "Shout, Mark, shout, and jump as you never jumped before!"

They both shout with all their lung power, and the men around the fire turn towards them, having heard the snarling wolves already, but paying little attention to them.

Now for it!

One fierce stride more, and the edge will be reached, and the leap made.

But the wolves are right behind, close upon the heels of the two men.

They will not be shaken off, and already they anticipate the horrible feast.

Two human forms leap into the air as the chasm is reached, the dark waters bubbling and foaming beneath them.

Two human forms go flying over the boisterous waters, and a wild shout of triumph goes up from the other side.

But stop!

They have not yet cleared the fearful space, and the wolves are no further away than before.

Good Heaven! what means that dreadful cry?

As the men spring into the air a wolf—the biggest and fiercest of all—leaps after them.

Death is not to be cheated of his own, after so tremendous a struggle.

Oh! the brute has landed upon the back of one of the men, and fastened its teeth in the fur collar of his coat.

One man clears the gap and falls senseless into the arms of his friends.

The other, with the wolf upon his back, falls into the dark and troubled waters, while a wail of anguish goes up from every beholder.

The wolves, cheated of their prey, all but one, scatter right and left, the bullets of the men falling thick and fast amongst them.

Some have fallen or been pushed into the water, and the swift stream carries them under the ice and down out of sight.

The one man who has escaped is hurried to the fire and efforts made to restore him.

Turn his face to the light, throw aside his fur cap and coat, and let us see him.

Which one is it?

Is it Kit?

No, it is Mark Carrington who has escaped.

Kit, then, has perished!

As the dreadful truth flashes upon the men they turn away in silence,

and more than one shed great tears of sorrow, for there is not one of them but what loves him like a brother.

"Save Kit, boys; save him, for God's sake!" cried Mark, arousing himself. "But for him I would not be here now. He saved me from the wolves when I thought it was all up with me."

There was no reply.

"Is he safe, boys?"

No answer.

"My God! it was he who uttered that cry, then, as we dashed over together. Poor Kit! I'd rather it had been me, a hundred times!"

CHAPTER IV.

THE WOLF HUNTERS AND THEIR PLOT—AN EAVESDROPPER DETECTED.

It is night, and the wind still howls fiercely without, the light of the moon, undimmed by a single cloud, still flooding the scene with its brilliancy.

Within a rude hut, tightly sealed to keep out the cold, before a blazing fire of pine and hemlock knots, are sitting two men, smoking the thick, gray clouds arising to the blackened ceiling.

They are both stoutly built, tough and wiry, with not an ounce of superfluous flesh upon their bones, their heavy, muscular arms and legs and thick, bull necks denoting great strength.

They both wear full beards, but one has a bad scar running down the left cheek—the reminder of a fierce fight with wolves, for he, like his comrade, is a wolf hunter, and a man of great prowess.

He is called Donald Allen, and lives alone in the hut, having neither wife nor child, though his companion, Bart Reynolds, who is his nearest neighbor, has a wife and three children—two sons and a daughter.

The sons are of the same age as Kit, and are jealous of his success in taking the scalps of wolves, declaring that they will beat him yet.

The daughter is a year older than Kit, is called Becky, and has conceived a strong liking for our hero, which he by no means reciprocates, having no desire to marry a girl with the temper she is reputed to have, report coming considerably short of the truth in this instance, for her temper is gall and wormwood combined, while rumor calls it vinegarish.

Becky comes rightly by her disposition, however, her mother being a perfect Xantippe, Delilah and Jezebel rolled into one, and being capable of making home a regular Inferno, to speak mildly, for Bart, christened Bartholomew, but shortened for convenience.

The sons of Bart Reynolds are called respectively Rube and Rufe, otherwise Reuben and Rufus, though the waggish neighbors denominate them Fire and Brimstone, out of compliment to their tempers, which are as hot and intemperate as one cares to find, rather more so, in fact.

The boys are wolf hunters as well as their father, and they hate Kit with all the force their jealous nature is capable of, always casting slurs upon his actions and trying to pick flaws in his character.

Having mentioned them, we will let them rest for awhile and return to the two men seated before the fire in Donald Allen's cabin.

"Old Squire Jones has offered a prize of a silver mounted rifle, I see," says Donald, "for the biggest number of scalps taken by one man from now until Christmas."

"Yes, and I know who's going to get it."

"Who's that? Clif King, or Kit, as they call him?"

"No, condemn him, but my boy Rufe."

"He ain't as good a shot as Kit."

"That's all right, Donald. You don't like the young whelp any better than I do, so you needn't say anything. What if me and Rufe chips in and gives Rufe a dozen or so scalps occasionally to swell his figger, you ain't goin' to say nothin'?"

"Duce a bit, neighbor."

"It's all in the family, anyhow, 'cause what we all make goes into the one pot, the old woman's baskets and Becky's weaving, as well as the pelts and scalps me an' my boys git."

"Yes, you stick together, your tribe does, and that's all right."

"Why shouldn't we?"

"No reason at all, only I'll tell ye a better plan yet."

"What fur?"

"Gettin' that rifle."

"Oh!"

"I don't care for sech toys myself, fur I'd rather have my own old smash and bang musket, what I can chuck half a pound o' buckshot

in, better than all the fancy gimcracks ye kin buy, but if Rufe wants it I kin put ye up to a dodge."

"What is it?"

"Get rid o' the cuss that ye think may take it away from Rufe."

"Get rid of him?"

"Sartain."

"How ye going to do it?"

"Ye know my wolf pen?"

"Reckon I do."

"Chuck him into it."

"Gorry! That'll clean him out wuss than the deuce."

"Wall, I reckon."

"But he'll be missed."

"What of it?"

"And folks'll raise a smell about it."

"Let 'em. Ain't men been missing afore this? Can't ye take his bones and his clothes and put 'em in the woods for somebody to find?"

"Yes."

"What's the verdict, then? Chawed up by varmints, that's what it is."

"And good enough, too, by mighty!"

"But the thing is, how to git him away so's to have no suspicion of the real state o' the case."

"Ketch him alone in the woods or—I'll tell you what. Decoy him to this yer place. Your Becky is sweet onto him?"

"Yes, and he'd sooner swaller pison than look at her."

Donald laughed long and loud.

"Wall, ye must say, neighbor, that your Becky ain't got the evenest disposition what's lyin' around loose in these parts."

"No, she ain't," growled Bart, "and her mam makes the house a reg'lar little bad place when she's got a mind ter."

"Let's see. He goes to the village on occasion, don't he, when there's a skatin' match or suthin'?"

"Yes; there's one a-goin' on to-night, I understand, though me an' my boys never goes."

"Cause why? Ye bean't wanted," retorted Donald, with a laugh. "Never mind me, neighbor, if I have my little joke on occasion. You kin have the use of my wolf pen when you want it, an' I won't charge ye nuthin' 'cept to let me see the fun."

In order to let the reader understand more clearly the character of our friend Donald, we will explain the nature and uses of this wolf pen, and also give him an insight into certain dishonest practices resorted to by some of the wolf hunters, though not the habit of all by any means.

The government paid so much for every wolf scalp delivered to its agents at certain appointed places, and, of course, the more of these a hunter brought in the more hard dollars he received.

Some of the hunters, and Donald was one, were in the habit of secretly getting wolf cubs and raising them until they became of a sufficient size to kill, when their scalps were taken with the others obtained in a legitimate way, and the bounty demanded for them.

Donald had regular breeding pens for his cubs, retaining a certain number of she wolves for that purpose, and another pen where he put his pets, as he called them, when they were weaned, and when they grew to the necessary size.

The old saying in regard to a vicious young man, that he grows like a young wolf, will be readily seen to be most appropriate when one comes to watch the growth and development of these animals.

They seem to jump at one stride from playful cubs to snarling dogs, and thence again to savage wolves, the progress being more rapid than in almost any other wild animal, they being by nature most savage and untractable. Whoever has seen a tame wolf has seen a white blackbird as well, for one is just about as common as the other—to be seen once in a thousand years.

There were at this time over one hundred wolves in Donald's pen, all in various stages of development, and the fate in store for Kit may readily be imagined.

Once cast into the midst of the pack of four-footed demons, he would have no more chance of his life than if he leaped into the mouth of a seven times heated furnace.

What kind of men must they be who could sit down and talk calmly of dooming a fellow creature to such a death?

Of a truth, they must be worse than the wolves themselves, for they have immortal souls, and the wolves have not.

"I'll tell you," said Donald, suddenly, "I owe him one for lettin' out that I split the scalps and made one sell for two, and I'm bound to get even with him."

"Well, how are you goin' to fix it up? Tell me that."

"Get him into Dan Brown's woods after herbs for his mother's rheumatics and then collar him. Dan kin tell him about it, and as he's allus lookin' for suthin' to do his mother good, he'll swaller the bait like a pike, hook and all."

As Donald concluded, Bart suddenly sprang up, overturning his stool, and making a dash for the door, dove outside in a great hurry.

He presently returned, dragging in a boy of fourteen years by the collar, bestowing sundry kicks and cuffs upon him, as he pulled him along.

"This young cub was listenin' to us," said Bart. "I ketched a glimpse of him through the window. You know him?"

"Yes. It's Ned Rowell, and he thinks the world o' Kit."

"Yes, I do," said the boy, stoutly, "an' if you fellers are goin' to come any foolin' on him, I'll tell him all about it."

"We was on'y joking," said Donald.

"That's a lie, an' you know it. You ain't one o' the jokin' kind, ye old heathen."

"Ye young whelp, take that!" and Donald knocked the lad senseless to the floor by one blow of his brawny fist.

"He'll split the whole business on us if we let him go," said Bart.

"He won't get a chance," hissed the enraged Donald. "To the pen with the brat!"

CHAPTER V.

KIT'S BRAVE STRUGGLE FOR LIFE.

As Kit arose in the air to make the daring leap across the rushing waters, he felt a heavy weight thrown suddenly upon his back.

He knew too well what it was, for the hot breath of the monster wolf was upon his cheek, and as he partly turned his head he saw the red mouth and fiery eyes of the brute, in all their horrible distinctness.

He felt himself being borne down towards the water, and knew that he stood but little chance for his life.

Even then his coolness did not desert him, and his busy brain at once suggested a means of escape.

His keen knife was ready to hand, and this he drew as his feet struck the water.

In a second he had plunged it to the hilt in the fierce animal's side.

The creature gave a howl and dug his sharp claws deep into Kit's back.

He tried to fasten his teeth in the young man's throat, but the thick fur collar which surrounded it prevented him.

Kit plunged the knife once more into the wolf's body, and then they both disappeared beneath the water.

More by instinct than actual knowledge was Kit's hand guided to the animal's heart, and at the third blow he drove the knife home, the hot blood dyeing the icy waters a deep crimson.

The animal gave one last gasp and released its hold upon Kit's back, floating away in an instant, the swift current bearing the body downstream with great rapidity.

When Kit arose his head struck against a solid mass of ice.

He had been swept below the edge of the opening, and was under the frozen surface.

He struck out for the hole, well knowing in what direction it was.

The current was too strong for him, however, and he was forced back by the rushing waters.

Again he essayed to reach the opening, but with no better success.

He was carried down stream in spite of himself, and he knew that it would be impossible to reach the anxiously sought for spot.

He could not hold his breath much longer, and the weight of his clothes and his rifle, which was slung over his shoulder, was already pulling him down.

The current swept him on as though he had been but a chip, and now his head began to swim and strange, grotesque figures to dance before his eyes.

He dared not open his mouth, though the blood seemed starting

from his nose and ears, the latter ringing with weird, unearthly sounds.

His thoughts flew with lightning speed, and he recalled every incident that had ever occurred in his young life with startling distinctness.

He felt that his last hour had come, though even then he would not despair, would not give up all hope.

Oh, for a breaking up of the ice, that he might have one chance for his life!

Oh, for an airhole, be it ever so small, that he might breathe once more before he died.

His hand suddenly struck a jagged edge of the ice under which he was being hurried along so fast.

A ray of hope darted through his mind.

He had come to an airhole in the ice.

He thrust his hand upward with all his force, the resistance being but slight.

He felt the cold air blowing upon it, and knew that it was above the surface.

Then with a mighty effort, born of the one glimmer of hope within him, he threw himself upward and opened his mouth.

Thank Heaven, he could breathe!

He drew in a full draught of the invigorating air, filling his lungs to the very bottom, and then discharging the air, took another deep breath.

The gaunt figure of death was pursuing him even now, and was transformed from the fierce wolf to the current of the river.

It was trying, with all its might, to drag him under once more, and sweep him onward under the ice on to ruin.

It tugged at his limbs, and had already loosened his hands, when his good angel, hovering near, stepped in to save him.

I have said that Kit had his rifle still slung over his shoulder.

When his head protruded from the airhole the muzzle of the rifle was thrown up also.

As Kit felt himself going under once more he thought of this weapon.

In an instant he ducked his head under the strap, and threw the rifle high into the air.

By the merest Providence it fell across the hole, which was not more than two feet in diameter!

Kit grasped it with one hand as he was going down, and held on firmly.

Then, with the assistance of his other hand, he drew himself up out of the water, and upon a level with the surrounding ice.

Then, with the last strength he had, for the cold had greatly benumbed him, he succeeded in pulling himself out upon the ice, where he fell at full length.

He had just time to call for help when consciousness left him, and he sank back exhausted.

The dread enemy was still upon his track, and more determined than ever not to be again cheated of his victim.

Saved from the wolves, saved from the river, he was yet in great danger of being frozen to death.

But the wind had interfered in his behalf this time.

A sudden flaw, an unexpected change, had borne the sound of that last despairing cry to the ears of his comrades.

In a twinkling they were upon the alert.

"He is saved!" cried Doc, seizing a brand from the fire. "Look for him, boys."

"Downstream," said Mark. "Doubtless he has struck a hole in the ice."

Catching up blazing torches from the fire, a dozen stout fellows glided off downstream at a rapid pace, spreading out across the ice and waving their torches over their heads.

Doc had borrowed a pair of skates, and he was now at the head of the party in search of Kit.

Swiftly he flew over the smooth surface, his torch throwing a broad glare of light ahead of him, contrasting strangely with the moonlight.

Here and there glided dark figures, around whom played dancing lights in the most weird manner.

They were the friends of Kit, waving their torches over their heads, but in the distance they looked like so many Jack-o'-lanterns.

Suddenly Doc espied a dark spot upon the ice at some distance from him.

He knew in a moment that it must be Kit.

He increased his speed and made direct for the black object, shouting:

"Here he is, boys. Hurrah!"

The others hearing his cry, followed the direction of his torch, and soon came up with him kneeling upon the ice.

He had found Kit, and now held the latter's head upon his lap while he poured some liquor down Kit's throat.

"Take off his skates, Will Harris; and George Cook, you run back to the fire and get a buffalo robe," said Doc.

The skates were soon taken off, and Cook returned in a few moments with two robes—big ones, too, in which they wrapped Kit, and then carried him to the nearest house, which happened to be Doc's.

Doc's pretty sister sat by the side of the bed in which they had placed Kit after getting off his stiff clothes, the keen air having frozen them hard, and as fast as he wanted anything she supplied it.

The excitement through which Kit had passed brought on a fever, but by careful nursing he was all right in the morning, and never did a patient have so faithful an attendant as was Susie Whitford, the young man's betrothed.

By universal consent the skating match was postponed until some other night when Kit should be at his best, for they all wanted to see him carry off the prize, or at least try to do so.

Mark Carrington remained with one of the villagers until the morning, when he went home to his wife and boy with the news of his narrow escape, and of the brave defense of Kit.

Kit himself felt in first-rate condition in the morning, and as he knew his mother would not worry about him, set off for the woods for the purpose of picking up a stray wolf or so.

He little knew of the adventures in store, nor of the deadly peril in which his life would be placed by the malice of his enemies.

CHAPTER VI.

RESCUED FROM DEATH.

To the wolf pen the two inhuman wretches hurried the poor lad, despite his cries and desperate struggles to escape.

He was powerless in their strong grasp, and Donald quickly smothered the lad's cries by placing one brawny hand over his mouth.

Across the yard they hurried him, and into a small covered inclosure leading to the pen, but shut off from it by a heavy gate.

"It wouldn't do to disturb the pets to-night," said Donald, with a coarse laugh, "but we'll jest let this whelp know what he's got to expect."

The men thereupon took Ned and tied him securely to a bench not far from the gate, gagging him so that he could make no noise.

Donald then opened the gate about six inches, fastening it in that position in a manner to render it impossible for a wolf to squeeze through, or to widen the distance.

After these preparations had been made the wretch gave the poor lad a wound in the arm, and scattered the blood upon the floor near the gate.

"They'll smell that soon enough," he muttered, "but I guess I might as well stir 'em up a little, so as to let this cub know what he's got in store for himself."

He picked up a billet of wood lying close at hand, and, reaching up over the gate, threw it with full force to a corner of the pen where a lot of wolves were huddled together asleep.

It struck in the middle of the pack, and upon the instant there was a terrible snapping and snarling.

The two men retreated, for in a second a dozen savage wolves had reached the gate and were lapping up the blood scattered there by the wolf keeper.

They thrust their noses through the opening, vainly endeavoring to get at the boy, whose legs they could almost touch.

"That's all right," laughed Donald. "Come along, Bart, the picnic will last all night."

Then the cruel men went back to the stifling house to drink and smoke and laugh over the agony of the poor boy left to the mercies of the wolves.

They knew well enough that the creatures could not get at him, but they knew also that he would be nearly devoured with fright, and be thinking every instant that the next would be his last.

And so he did, poor lad, the ordeals he went through that night being enough to add ten years to a man's life.

The hungry wolves rushed against the gate, snapping and barking, grinding their white teeth in anger, and howling with baffled rage.

Their eyes shone like fire, and every pair of the flaming orbs seemed a dozen to the fevered imagination of the poor boy.

They reached their paws through, armed with sharp claws, but reach as they would they could not quite touch him.

He did not know that he was safe from actual harm, but imagined that it was only a question of time, and that at last the voracious monsters would clutch a leg or an arm, and drag him through the opening into the pen.

Worse than that, they might tear him slowly to pieces and condemn him to a lingering death, more horrible a thousand times than if they had at once made an end of him.

He knew not at what moment they might fasten their sharp claws or sharper teeth upon his tender flesh, and thus he suffered in anticipation all the horrors of a frightful death.

Once in awhile one of the wolves would come nearer to him than before, and his soul would sink within him at the thought that his time had come at last.

Then the others, crowding the monster from his place of vantage, would try to reach the lad themselves, and hope would arise in his heart only to be crushed down again.

How horrible seemed the glittering eyes and bloody mouths of the brutes, how strong and sharp their claws, how piercing their needle-like teeth, as he sat there almost within reach, bound and helpless, and suffering all the agonies of one condemned.

The hours dragged slowly along on leaden feet, and every moment was an eternity of suffering for the unfortunate youth, who could picture only the agonies of death and fix his thoughts on nothing else.

The gates did not reach quite to the top of the inclosure, there being a space of less than a foot between the top and the ceiling, and at last the wolves tried to force themselves through this narrow opening.

The upper edge of the gates bristled with sharp spikes, which were designed to prevent the animals from getting over—and, indeed, served their purpose well.

The boy did not know this, and when he saw the gleaming eyes of a savage wolf peering at him from between the spikes, and saw his strong paws hanging over the edge, he gave himself up for lost.

Not one, but half a dozen of the brutes were now glaring at him from above, while below the entire space was filled with shining eyes, grasping claws, savage mouths, and glimpses of cruel teeth, gnashing and grinding, in anticipation of tearing his tender flesh.

It mattered not to him that he was beyond their reach, for in imagination they had already fastened upon him, and he could not have suffered more had he been thrown at once to the devilish pack.

Great drops of cold sweat stood upon his pale forehead, his locks were damp with it, and icy chills ran down his back and froze the blood in his veins.

His strength gave out at last, and in very mercy he swooned away, while the wolves still yelped and snarled and vainly endeavored to reach him—so near and yet so unattainable.

The two human brutes found him thus unconscious when they came to the pen the next morning after a drunken sleep.

For a moment they thought him dead, and that they had been cheated of their expected fun; but Bart soon detected warmth above the boy's heart, tearing aside his jacket, inserting his great hand, and placing it upon his chest.

The lips trembled just a little also, and gave indications that life still remained in the unconscious form.

Donald carried him into the house and stretched him in front of the fire, where he was soon warmed to consciousness.

It was with no humane feeling that this was done, but rather from a malignant feeling, of which the arch fiend himself might be ashamed.

They preferred that he should be conscious when thrown to the wolves, in order that his sufferings might be the keener, and that they might enjoy hearing his piteous cries.

In order to give him a little more strength, Bart went so far as to force a swallow of fiery whisky down Ned's throat, which, while it made him choke and gag, did warm him up and give him a fictitious strength, which, when it should pass away, would leave him only the more weak and wretched.

"You miserable brutes," gasped the lad, when he found his voice.

"You'll have to pay for this, see if you don't. I'll tell Kit, and he'll lick you out of your boots."

"Shut up," growled Donald, raising his fist. "Ye know too much, an' we're goin' ter give ye to the wolves."

"You're wicked enough to do anything, Don Allen, an' I know you, too, Bart Reynolds, you and your hull tribe. Them boys o' yours is wuss 'n you, but they can't lick Kit."

"Kit be blowed; he was drowned in the river last night, so I've heard, and ye won't see any more o' him, so ye might's well stop talking about him."

"Never mind if he's dead or not, that's all gammon," snapped Ned, his spirits rising within him. "You're afraid of him, that's what, and ye hate to hear him talked about."

The two scoundrels left the lad alone for two or three hours while they had their breakfasts, and then they returned, bringing Rufe and Rube Reynolds and one or two other kindred wretches with them to witness the boy's sufferings.

They dragged him to the pen once more, and opening the gates just wide enough, were upon the point of throwing him to the wolves, when a ringing shout was heard, a strong arm snatched the boy from their grasp, and slamming the gates shut, a young man stood before them holding the lad by one hand, while with the other he grasped a glittering knife.

The young man was Kit.

CHAPTER VII.

A VILLAIN SAVED—PREMONITIONS OF DANGER.

"Stand aside," cried Kit, "or I will let yon howling pack of wolves in upon you all."

"Shove him through the gates," whispered Rufe; "they ain't fastened tight, and they open outward."

Kit saw the movement upon the part of the enemy, and seizing Ned, drew him closely to him and sprang aside as the crowd rushed upon him.

Striking right and left with his keen knife, he forced a passage and rushed from the place as a fierce cry for help arose on the air.

Rufe Reynolds had been carried by the force of the assault intended for Kit through the gates and in among the wolves.

In an instant they would be upon him and rend him to pieces.

He quickly turned and sprang towards the gates, his friends deserting him to a man.

He had almost reached the gates when a wolf sprang upon his back and dug its cruel claws into his neck.

Then he uttered that unearthly cry for help which Kit heard outside the stockade.

Springing to the top of the paling, the young man took in the whole situation at a glance.

The man was an enemy of his, and would have consigned him to just such a fate.

And yet he could not stand by and see any human being perish so horribly.

In an instant he made up his mind to save the fellow if there was any earthly possibility of his doing so.

He dared not leap in among the wolves, but he had his trusty rifle ready, and, quick as a flash, it was at his shoulder.

Bang!

Whiz!

G-rr-owl!

The bullet had struck the animal in the head and caused almost instant death.

The limp form fell to the ground as the other wolves rushed up.

While they were rending and tearing it in shreds, the wretch, who richly deserved such a fate himself, made one bound and reached the gates.

Without stopping to close them, he sprang into the little covered inclosure and thence through to the outside.

He had left all the doors wide open, and in another moment the wolves would have been turned loose upon the neighborhood.

Kit had jumped down from the stockade when he saw the escape of Rufe, and luckily he noticed that the retreating scoundrel had left the door of the house open.

Quick as thought he rushed in, and at the imminent peril of his life, swung to the gates, clearing a passage first by swinging his clubbed rifle fiercely about him.

When he had made all fast he went out, being attracted by a cry from Ned.

He found Donald Allen with the boy in his strong grasp, while with a heavy strap he was beating the little fellow most unmercifully.

With one tremendous stride Kit reached the man's side, and raising his gloved hand, dealt the brute a stunning blow under the left ear, which stretched him at full length upon the snow.

"You contemptible cur," he hissed. "You have no more kind feelings than a wolf itself. I would have done well to let loose those fierce creatures upon you."

"Why didn't you?" sneered Rufe.

"Because all our people are not like you, and I would not endanger their lives. If you had had a spark of gratitude in your heart, Rufe Reynolds, you wouldn't have stood by and seen that child beaten by yonder brute."

"It wasn't any of my business."

"But it was of mine. It was you that wanted to hurl me among the wolves. Look out for yourself when you are next in danger, for I may not be at hand to help you out."

Had the miserable boor possessed the least grain of gratitude, or of any right feeling, these words would have caused him to blush with shame and beg Kit's pardon for his unfeeling conduct.

But he had none, and therefore he only laughed a coarse, brutal laugh, and said with an oath:

"Oh, that's all right. If ye're fool enough to save a feller like me, what hates ye worse'n old scratch, from bein' chewed up by wolves, why it's your own fault, that's all."

"Come, Ned," said Kit, "we are better out of this place than in it," and with that Kit shouldered his rifle and started for the woods, followed by Ned.

He had been upon his way thither when he had suddenly espied the inhuman scoundrels taking Ned to the pen, and in a moment guessed what they intended doing with him.

He at once dashed up to the house, and entering rescued Ned, as we have already described.

"Where are you going, Kit?" asked Ned, as our hero started off, after having overthrown the brawny Donald.

"To Dan Brown's woods."

"Don't you do it, Kit, for these fellers mean mischief. I overheard them two ruffians, Bart and Donald, saying as how they were going to fix ye, and I wouldn't go there."

"Then I won't, Ned, for more than likely there will be more than I could handle alone. Let Donald beware, though, for I know of his dishonest practices, and can expose him if I choose."

"He raises wolves so as to get their scalps easier."

"I know he does, but Squire Jones does not, and he will find it out if Donald don't take care."

"And Rufe thinks he's going to get that silver-mounted rifle which the squire is going to give, don't he?"

"I am going to claim that myself, Ned, and on Christmas eve you shall see me carry it off."

"I hope so, Kit; indeed I do."

"You will go home with me, Ned? You are safer with my mother and sister than where these wretches can get hold of you."

"Indeed I am, but we must hurry, for the days are short; you have a long way to go, and it looks like a storm."

"I can skate, my boy."

"But what about me?"

"Oh, to be sure. Have you no skates?"

"No."

"Oh, well, if it comes on to storm—for it does indeed look like it—you can stay at Doc's."

They reached the house where Doc Whitford lived at about noon, and the lad was as welcome as Kit, being a bright little fellow, and, considering his few advantages, intelligent beyond his years.

"I don't see as you are any the worse for your adventures last night, Kit," said Doc, who had been named Zadoc, but which appellation had been shortened to its present form. "We have postponed the skating match till Saturday, though we might have it to-night, you are looking so well."

"I must return, Doc, for my mother and Nellie are alone, and will expect me."

"Then if you must go I'll go too."

"I shall be delighted to have you."

"Only you needn't go this minute. Stop and have dinner; you've time enough."

"A storm is coming on."

"Nonsense."

"But I say there is, Doc. Will you let Ned stay at your house a few days?"

"Of course. Susie thinks the world of Ned—next to—well, you know who."

"Doc Whitford, you're a regular tease," said the pretty Susie, pretending to be very angry, but really exceedingly pleased.

The time passed away quickly in such pleasant company, and it was after three o'clock when Kit announced that he really could not think of remaining any longer.

The sky had become overcast, and the wind moaned and groaned in the thick woods, whistled along the river bank, and sighed among the scattered trees around Doc's house.

Doc buckled on his skates when he reached the river and challenged Kit to a race.

"We may have a race that we do not bargain for," answered Kit, starting to put on his skates. "We ought to have set out an hour ago."

"Why, it's only ten miles, Kit."

"I know that, Doc, but I tell you we shall have the snow down upon us in half an hour."

"Well, are you ready?"

"Yes."

"Then here we go."

Away they started over the smooth ice, neck and neck, at a lively pace, the wind fairly shrieking around them.

In less time than Kit had predicted heavy flakes of snow began to fall, and in half an hour from the start their path was white with the glittering particles.

CHAPTER VIII.

LOST IN THE SNOW.

"Put in lively, Doc," said Kit, after a long silence. "We must not stop now."

"How it does come down. I never saw it so thick."

"And the darkness is coming. There'll be no moonlight for us to-night."

The snow fell fast and furious, the wind driving it in great drifts across the smooth ice, now piling it to the depth of a foot, and then sweeping the whole mass away at one gust.

It came down in large flakes and in perfect masses, the whole air being white with it, and all the landscape was shut out from view, the eyes being blinded to all else.

It was impossible to see further than a few feet ahead of one, and the night seemed to come down sooner than usual and hide everything from sight, the blinding storm completing the work most completely.

The two skaters seemed like sheeted ghosts as they glided swiftly along, the snow adhering to their garments and freezing on, so that from head to heel they were one mass of white.

It got into their eyes and mouths, though they bowed their heads; it crept in between their clothes and skin, and everywhere that the least crack afforded an entrance did it work in, around their necks and wrists, under their caps, and even down their bootlegs.

It was all-permeating, and seemed to drive in with the force of a flood, notwithstanding the swift movements of the young men, who now followed the course of the river more by instinct than actual knowledge.

Thicker and faster yet it fell, and before long they had considerable difficulty in getting over the ice on account of the drifts which they could neither see nor skate clear of on account of the darkness and the blinding storm.

How the wind did howl about them, driving the white particles in perfect sheets straight into their faces and under their feet, making a thick drift where but an instant before was a regular glare of ice.

The runners of their skates became clogged with the snow, which now melted and now froze without any regularity, impeding their movements and doubling their weight.

Several times Kit struck his chest a solid blow or two, and scat-

tered the white covering all about, brushing it off only to make room for more.

The more it snowed the harder it seemed to do so, and the thicker it lay upon the ice, the wind seeming at last to have lost control over it.

"Have you any idea where we are, Doc?" asks Kit at length, pausing from sheer exhaustion.

"Not I; haven't you?"

"Not the slightest; the landmarks are all blotted out."

"We must certainly have come ten miles by this time."

"We have been long enough under ordinary circumstances, to be sure, but you can't tell anything on a night like this."

"I know I am as tired as if I'd come twenty miles at the least. I never had such hard work getting ahead before."

"We have passed Mark Carrington's house, if I mistake not, and I think our place ought to be somewhere hereabouts."

"You don't seem to see the road leading to it, do you, Kit?"

"No, I'm blessed if I can see anything, and we may be five miles below our house for all I know."

"What are you going to do?"

"I don't know."

"Well, when a fellow like you gets puzzled it's a hard case. Do you suppose that shouting would do any good?"

"No; we might be near a house, and we might be five miles from one. My neighbors don't live very close to me."

"You're right; but suppose we push on a little further and see how things look."

"There's no let up in the snow yet, as you can see, is there?"

"No, sir."

"Then I don't see the use of going any further. Tell you what, Doc. I've an idea we are not very far from the path."

"You think so?"

"Yes; suppose we strike towards the bank and see what we can find. If we get under the lee of the trees it will be better traveling."

"All right, Kit. You're the captain, and ought to know best."

The two young men struck off at right angles to the course they had been taking, or at least supposed they did, it being utterly impossible to distinguish the trees on the bank from anything else, all things being of the same dazzling whiteness, and all forms and shapes being completely swallowed up in the whirling flakes.

They had proceeded some distance, and still did not seem to get any nearer the bank, when Doc proposed that they change their course.

"We may not have started out at the right angle," he said, "and so it makes the distance greater."

"Well, then, let us start at a good square right angle this time, and we ought to fetch it."

They did not do it that time either, and after going on for at least ten minutes, they found themselves as far from the bank, evidently, as they were in the beginning.

There was positively no cessation of the storm, and now their skates were of more hindrance than assistance.

Kneeling in the snow, they loosened the straps and took the skates off with difficulty, the snow that had worked in between the soles of their boots and the wood of the skates having frozen the two together.

After they had been taken off at last, the young men found considerable trouble in standing, their feet tingling after being strapped so long and then released from the pressure.

Fastening the skates together by the straps and swinging them over their shoulders, Kit and Doc danced about upon the ice at a lively rate for a few minutes in order to warm their feet, and then made another attempt to reach the bank.

"Don't let us stop now nor change our course until we strike something," was Kit's advice, and they determined to observe it as far as possible.

For fifteen or twenty minutes they kept on, guided by instinct, if by anything, when Kit suddenly cried out:

"Here we are. Hurrah!"

"Found the bank?"

"Yes; but it seems steep. Hello! here's a limb. I'll haul myself up."

He seized the limb of a tree which hung quite low and pulled him-

self up, not without completely covering himself and Doc with the snow that had lodged upon it.

Crawling along the limb for a little distance, Kit dropped to the ground, and called on Doc to follow.

They presently found themselves in what appeared to be a path, and along this they traveled until Doc suddenly seized Kit's hand, and said he saw a light ahead of them.

"By George, so do I," answered Kit. "I see two, and I don't like them."

"Why not?"

"Because those lights are the eyes of wolves."

"Good God!"

"See, they have gone, and now look there to the right. By Jove, they have shifted. That hungry fiend is following us."

"I will shoot him."

"No, no, it would be madness. Do you want to bring a whole pack down upon us?"

"Hark!"

A terrible sound was heard at this moment which nearly froze their blood.

"The howl of a wolf close at hand signaling to others of his kind."

"Push on, for Heaven's sake!" groaned Kit. "No matter where we go so long as we balk these fiends."

They crashed through brush and briar, over rocks and stumps, into snowdrifts and half-frozen bogs, keeping up a break-neck speed, and caring for no obstacles, however great.

Kit's gun was discharged accidentally, and made a great racket, but it seemed to frighten the wolves away, for their cries sounded at a greater distance, and was soon lost altogether.

Suddenly Kit came with full force against some object, tree or rock, he could not tell what, and was thrown with great violence to the ground.

All was as dark as Erebus, and it was impossible to see one's hand before the face, and where they were or how they came there it was not to be told.

They had escaped the wolves, but were lost in the snow most hopelessly.

CHAPTER IX.

THE MYSTERIOUS CAVE AND ITS OCCUPANT.

LOST in the snow!

The situation of the young wolf hunters was not an enviable one. They were in total darkness; knew not where they were nor to what dangers they might be exposed, and were totally unable to extricate themselves from their difficulties.

"Have you got a tinder box, Doc?" asked Kit.

"Yes, but of what use is it?"

"To light a fire."

"We can't find any dry stuff in this wood."

"I don't think we are in a wood."

"Where then?"

"A cave, by the sound."

"A cave?"

"Yes."

"Our voices do have a hollow sound, for a fact. I had not noticed it before."

"We must have a light so as to determine where we are."

"By George! What is that?"

"I hear nothing."

"Listen!"

A low growl was heard at some little distance, and the two friends stood close together, not knowing but that they had intruded by chance into the den of some wild beast.

Then they heard another sound, which surprised them as much as the first had done.

It was the sound of a human voice, speaking in angry tones to them.

"What want ye here?" it said. "Why have ye come into my dwelling unsought and unasked?"

"Is this your dwelling?" asked Kit, seeing no one, though he strained his eyes to their utmost.

"It is, and I care not to be disturbed."

"You must pardon us," answered Kit, "but we came here, quite unknown to ourselves, thinking we were still in the forest. This is a cave?"

"Ay, it is, and here I live, and until now have been undisturbed."

"Who are you?"

"That matters not. I am a hermit, and have foresworn the world and all in it. The night is wild and bitter cold, and I cannot turn you adrift to meet the wolves or freeze to death. What are your names?"

Kit told him, the unseen person repeating them to himself, in a half audible tone, as if trying to recall something to his mind, long since forgotten.

"How came you here?" he at length demanded.

"I know not. We lost our way in the blinding storm, and at last made our way to these woods, when, being followed by wolves, we made all haste to elude them, and knew not but what we were still in the wood when I came against this rocky wall."

"Doubtless you entered the cave without knowing it. I do not believe you would have intruded here without. Can you wait till I bring a light?"

"Certainly."

"Then remain where you are until my return. You can sit down where you are, if you please; you will find the floor of the cave both dry and warm. Do not get impatient if I seem to be gone a long time."

"We're obliged to you," said Doc, "for any accommodations better than the snow or the lair of a wolf. Take your own time."

They heard the footsteps of the unseen occupant of this mysterious cave die away in the distance and then Kit said, softly:

"This is all very strange, Doc. I never supposed there were any caves as large as this in these woods."

"Nor I; but the country is a wild one and I don't suppose I know half of the queer places about, though I have lived here nearly all my life."

"I never heard of a hermit, either. I wonder who the man is and why he lives such a lonely life."

"It's all lonesome enough, for that matter, up in these parts. Even by the lake, or down in the southern part of the State, it's different; but here, even in the settlements, there are not many people, and it would be easy enough to live like a hermit."

"I don't want to do so, then; I prefer to see people myself, and I wish there were more hereabouts."

In a few moments they saw the glimmer of a light in the distance, and soon the torch bearer came into view, the light showing him off to good advantage.

He was an old man, of more than ordinary height, wore a long white beard, his hair of the same hue hanging down upon his shoulders, and was dressed in furs, and rested one hand upon a stout staff.

The light of the torch revealed to the young men the roof and sides of a roomy cavern, at one end of which was a door of heavy plank set into the solid rock, and doubtless leading to some inner apartment.

"You are welcome to the rude hospitality my abode affords for the night," said the old man, "for I would not turn even a dog from my door to meet the perils of the storm and the fangs of the hungry wolves. In the morning you will doubtless be able to find your way to your homes."

This was a broad hint indeed, but neither Kit nor his friend minded that, having no desire to remain longer than over night.

"We are grateful for your kindness, sir," answered Kit, "for we have so utterly lost our way that it would be impossible for us to find our homes in the storm which rages without."

"Spare your thanks, young man," said the old recluse, rather shortly. "I give you shelter not because I want to, but because I must. Duty demands this of me, and therefore I do it. Follow me, and I will show you where you can dispose yourself for the remainder of the night."

He then led the way to a further corner of the cavern, where there was a pile of furs spread out upon the earth, and then, having held a torch until they had laid themselves down, blew it out, and went away.

Without stopping to discuss the strange conduct of their host, the young men now wrapped themselves up and devoted themselves to sleep, being utterly worn out, and so drowsy that they had hardly been able to keep their eyes open for the last ten minutes.

They slept for nearly ten hours, and when they awoke they saw

that the daylight partly illumined the cave, there being an entrance at some little distance.

They found food and a flask of liquor laid out upon the floor not far away, but there were no signs of their singular host nor had they heard him since his departure the night before.

Their appetites were rather sharp, and they attacked the food with a relish, eating every scrap and emptying the bottle, which contained diluted whisky.

They were neither of them what would be called hard drinkers, but during the cold winters of that section nearly everybody drank a certain amount of liquor in order to keep their blood warm, and the two young men did as the others did.

I do not say that strong drink is at all necessary to keep the blood in good condition, but merely state the facts as they existed, making no comments.

When they had eaten and drank to their complete satisfaction, they picked up their guns and skates and made their way towards the end of the entrance of the cavern.

They found that it led into a very deep and narrow ravine, down which they must have come without knowing it upon the previous night.

The snow lay thick and hard all around them, and not a trail of the tracks they must have made upon entering could be seen.

The crust was sufficiently strong to support their weight, and they made their way to the other end of the ravine, whence they had no difficulty in reaching the woods above, finding the river in plain sight when they left the hollow.

They were soon upon the ice, and after buckling on their skates, glided up and down for a short distance, when they succeeded in getting their bearings.

"We passed our house by a good three miles last night," said Kit. "I know where we are now, but I had no idea that there was such a cave as the one we slept in, nor such a person as the old hermit."

"He did not show himself this morning, and evidently did not care to be seen, nor to have us stay too long in his cave. I wonder how late it is?"

"By the sun it must be getting on towards noon, so you had better come and take dinner with me. To see the bright sunshine now, one would never suppose that there was such a wild storm last night."

"No, indeed. It has cleared off jolly cold, too. Suppose we have a race, though I know you can beat me without trying."

Away they scurried over the ice, and in about half an hour reached Kit's home where Mrs. King and Nellie gave them a warm welcome, and listened with eager interest to the story of their adventures.

Doc remained to dinner and over night, and on the day following, Kit went back home with him, carrying Nellie along, on a visit to Doc's sister, so she said; but he knew it was that she might see more of Doc.

Kit had a box sled, and when Nellie had been placed in this and well wrapped up, the two young men took hold of the rope and drew her over the ice with great rapidity, Nellie's cheeks being as red as when Kit had laughed at her for pretending to want to see Susie so much.

That night the skating match came off, a large bonfire having been made upon the ice, and a great many girls and boys being present to enjoy the fun, a supper being provided for the merry-makers at the close of the evening.

There were several contestants for the prize, but Kit distanced them all by a good hundred feet, and was declared the winner with a shout which caused his enemies to turn pale with suppressed rage.

CHAPTER X.

NED ROWELL'S BRAVE DEED.

As the next day was Sunday, Kit stayed over until Monday at the village, enjoying the society of Susie Whitford fully as much as Doc did that of Nellie.

The day after was stormy, and the two girls decided to prolong their visit still farther, Kit, Doc and young Ned Rowell proposing to go to Kit's, and leave Ned, after which the two young men would go into the woods to see what game they could find.

As there was considerable light snow upon the ground, they took their snowshoes with them to render traveling through the woods easier, having skates slung over their shoulders also, in case they cared to take to the river.

They all had rifles, Ned being provided with a small though trusty weapon, and in addition to this Kit and Doc had a revolver apiece, so that they were "well fixed," as Ned expressed it in striking, if not altogether elegant language.

While we are upon the subject, it will be as well to give a brief account of the lad whose life and adventures formed no mean part of the history which I am relating.

The boy was originally an Arab of the streets of New York, a regular gamin, sharp, shrewd and saucy, accustomed from his cradle to look out for himself, and cutting his eye teeth at an early age.

He was quick-witted, ready at repartee, lithe and active and not to be imposed upon by older or bigger boys, having been victorious in many a hard fought tussle where the chances seemed dead against him.

He had been sent West by the Children's Aid Society, not as an incorrigible by any means, but from choice, and had wandered from place to place, dissatisfied with the farmers who employed him, until he at last found himself in the wilds of Northwestern Minnesota.

Kit had found him out one day, half starved and in danger of freezing to death, and had taken care of him and got him a place to work, for which the poor waif felt duly grateful, and swore to be Kit's friend for life.

He had a pretty hard time with the farmer, who, in spite of Kit's recommendation, was not altogether a square sort of man, though Kit did not know this, and he finally ran away, and worked for different people, doing odd jobs, and not getting on very well.

He was honest enough, too much so, in fact, for some of the men, and his reports of the underhand doings of Donald Allen, Bart Reynolds and men of that stamp, brought them into disrepute, and himself into hot water.

Finally, Kit determined to take the boy home with him, this determination being strengthened after his rescue of the lad from the wolf pen.

Ned did not know his parents, averring that he did not think he had ever had any, for he could not remember them, and none of his old associates could even recollect that he had had anyone to look after him, except an old negress, who was considered a witch.

She was supposed to be aware of the youngster's parentage, and had even been heard to say that she could put her finger on Ned's father, if she chose, but as she was now dead, and had never disclosed her secret, it was safe to say that it never would be, at this late day.

All that the boy knew was that his name was Ned Rowell, and that he had his own living to make; that he was "no slouch, and never squealed," and that he did not care very much whether he had had a father or not, so long as there seemed no hope of his turning up.

He was a good shot with the rifle, and could trap beavers, foxes, and other game; would not tell a lie for anything; could imitate the notes of every bird in the forest; and, to those who knew how to take him right, was gentle and lovable, but a perfect little wildcat to those who "rubbed his fur the wrong way," as he said himself.

Such was Ned Rowell, as faithful and devoted to Kit King as a slave—fairly worshiping him, in fact, and ready to do anything to please his protector and show his gratitude.

As the three walked rapidly over the glistening snow, the flakes falling lightly around them, occasionally the wind shook the trees and sent the fleecy particles down upon them. Ned chatted gayly, the others breaking in now and then with a pleasant response.

They had nearly reached the house of Mark Carrington, when they heard a piercing shriek, evidently coming from that locality, and with swift steps they hurried forward, their snowshoes assisting them greatly.

As they reached the open space in front of the dwelling they beheld Mark's wife, greatly excited, wringing her hands and crying out in agony:

"Oh, my child! my child!"

"What has happened?" said Kit, quickly.

"My child, my baby boy!" still cried the woman, weeping piteously.

"What's become of him?" asked Ned. "Hurry up, and if there's any chance to save him, we'll do it."

"The wolf!" sobbed the woman.

"Did the wolf eat him?"

"No, no! only seized his dress in its horrid jaws, and scampered away into the woods!"

"He did not hurt the child?" asked Doc, eagerly.

"No, he carried it just as a dog would carry a basket; but I am so frightened. He will kill the poor little thing."

"How did it happen?" asked Kit. "Be quick, and tell us in which direction he went. We may be able to save the babe yet."

"I was at the wood pile, and had left the front door ajar; the baby was in the cradle, and when I came in at the back door I saw a big wolf scampering out at the front with the baby's dress between his teeth."

"Which way did he go?"

The poor woman pointed towards the woods, in a direction opposite to that from which the party had just come.

"Away with us!" cried Kit, unslinging his rifle, and bounding off upon the trail, which was very plain and distinct in the soft snow.

Doc and Ned swiftly followed, their rifles in hand, to be used at a moment's notice, and in a few minutes they were all darting through the woods at the top of their speed, the trail being as easy to follow as a road almost.

"It leads to the glen," cried Kit, "the regular abode of all the wolves about here."

"There he is now," cried Ned, a few moments later; "he's put the baby down on that flat rock. Look at him!"

Sure enough the huge gray brute had paused, and was seen at some little distance standing in bold relief upon an elevated spot of ground, bending over the child, and evidently licking his chops before beginning his toothsome meal.

Filled with horror lest he might shoot the child, and yet resolved to save him, Kit raised his rifle and sent a bullet whistling through the air, and close to the animal's head.

The gaunt and hungry wolf instantly caught up the precious burden again, and darted off with a fierce growl toward the deepest part of the forest.

The three hunters flew over the ground as fast as their feet could carry them, Ned Rowell sending a shot after the gray demon, which struck him in the flank and greatly diminished his speed.

"Good for you, Ned," cried Kit. "That was a good shot, and we will overhaul this fiend yet."

Suddenly, however, the wolf disappeared down a rocky path, and Ned exclaimed:

"He isn't going to the glen at all. There is a den nearer than that, and this is where he's bound."

They had lost sight of the creature, but his tracks were still visible, and after a few minutes they disappeared in a narrow opening in a ledge of rock.

Scattered bones and other indications showed that this was the den of wild beasts, and Kit was in an agony of apprehension lest their errand should even now prove fruitless, the hole leading to the place being too small for a man to force an entrance.

A fragment of soft, white cloth adhering to a sharp, jagged edge of rock showed that the wolf had passed through, and without doubt was now inside.

The thought was too horrible, and Kit groaned, feeling his heart utterly bowed down with despair.

Suddenly Ned, who had been running about, prying here and there, pecking into the mouth of the den and carefully examining the snow and the fallen trees lying about, said excitedly:

"Hurrah! He's come out again, and without the baby! he's left it inside!"

"That can afford us no consolation," said Kit, sorrowfully, "for it is impossible to enter the cave."

"What's the reason?" said Ned. "I'll do it myself. Didn't they always call me the little 'un in New York, and say I wasn't bigger'n a chaw o' terbacker?"

"But the wolves may be inside."

"Don't care if they is. Gimme a revolver and a knife to stick between my teeth. Light a torch and shine it inside, and I'll face the—"

"A wolf will be bad enough without mentioning anything else," said Doc, laughing.

The boy took a revolver from Kit, and a knife from Doc, and when a torch had been lit, crawled through the mouth of the cave cautiously, and soon nothing was to be seen of him but the heels of his boots, Kit holding the torch well within the opening.

The plucky little fellow advanced swiftly, the passage growing wider, until presently it turned at a sharp angle, and descended quite

abruptly into a good-sized space, close and hot and rank with animal odors.

"This is the rummiest hole I was ever in yet," muttered Ned, "and I've been in sewers and old boilers, and under docks and everywhere most."

The place was as dark as a pocket, but the boy could see two pairs of shining eyes ahead of him, and hear a snarling and snapping now and then, as if the occupants of the strange abode did not altogether fancy his intrusion.

"I'll bet that them's on'y cubs," he said to himself. "I wish I could see whether the kid is here or not. I'm goin' to kill them cubs, anyhow, so's they won't grow up into old wolves. Wouldn't Don Allen like 'em to put into his pen? You just bet. Hallo, what's that?"

He had heard the sound of a human voice in this mysterious place, the voice of a baby crying, and it excited him terribly.

"Bully for me!" he shouted, the noise causing the young wolves to growl and snarl afresh. "The kid is here. Hooray!"

Rushing forward upon his hands and knees, for the place was not high enough to stand upright in, and guided by the glistening eyes of the cubs, the lad reached the opposite side of the cave, knife in hand.

He could not see, but he could feel, and quickly ascertaining where the baby was, the little thing cuddling up to him lovingly, and then he grasped it firmly in one arm, and, with a sudden sweep, plunged the knife to the hilt into the body of one of the cubs.

"Pet wolves is all right for some fellows," he muttered, "but I don't believe in 'em myself," and then watching his chance, he quickly dispatched the other cub.

"Their scalps ain't no good," he said, "but they won't have any chance to get any bigger now. There, there, baby," he added, soothingly, "don't you fret, my darlin'. Neddy's got ye, and I'd just like to see ye took away from me by any old wolf now."

Hugging the infant tightly to his breast, the boy retraced his steps, and in a few minutes emerged from the dark passage in time to see Kit and Doc engaged in a terrific encounter with two monstrous wolves, evidently the owners of the lair.

CHAPTER XI.

NED IN TROUBLE AGAIN.

"Give it to 'em!" yelled the lad, and wrapping the baby up warmly in his own fur coat, he placed it upon the moss-covered rocks and joined in the battle.

Two shots from his revolver were the first intimation of his return, and Kit felt a great relief at seeing him safe and sound.

"Have you saved the baby?" cried Kit.

"Yes."

"Then let these fellows go into the cave if they like; we've been keeping them out for some time, lest they should interfere with you."

The hunters jumped aside, and in dashed the wolves, their subdued yells indicating that they had found the dead bodies of the cubs inside.

"Now then, to smoke them out," cried Doc, seizing a torch and setting fire to a quantity of brushwood which Kit and Ned had pushed into the opening.

The flames cracked and snapped, a vast volume of smoke arising therefrom which filled the cave and caused the wolves to dash out again in the open air.

The hunters stood ready, and when they came out the sharp crack of their rifles sounded upon the air, followed by the pattering reports of two six-chambered revolvers.

The wolves fell dead, shot through the brain, and Kit at once took their scalps, giving one to Doc and keeping one himself, after which they started to return to Mrs. Carrington's.

On the way they met Mark himself, with George Cook, Joe Deane, Will Harris, and other neighbors, who had started upon the trail as soon as they had heard the news of the accident.

Mark was delighted to recover his infant son, and when Kit told him how bravely Ned had done, he fairly overwhelmed the lad with grateful thanks, promising to be his friend for life.

The whole party then returned to Carrington's, where the young wife, delighted to see her baby safe and sound after his strange adventure, which is related to this day in the town, and hearing how Ned had conducted himself, caught the lad up in her arms and gave him a resounding kiss, at which everybody laughed, and the boy blushed to the roots of his curly hair.

"Ah, cheese it," he said, in characteristic language. "I ain't done nothing but what I had ought to do, so don't make so much fuss over me, or you'll be makin' me as proud as a turkey cock."

Then all hands were invited to dinner, and a merry time they had of it, Ned sitting at one end of the table, flanked by Kit and Doc, and pretty Mrs. Carrington at the other, with the baby in his high chair at her side.

It was nearly dark when the merry making broke up, and the three friends started once more upon their journey, which had been so startlingly interrupted.

A grand wolf hunt was organized for the next day, as all hands came to the determination that if the wolves were getting so bold as to carry off young children there had better be a diminution made in the number of these rapacious animals at once.

There was not much snow falling, the moon breaking through the clouds every now and then, and so, taking to the river, the three friends buckled on their skates, and buttoning their thick coats up to their chins, drawing on their woolen gloves, and pulling their fur caps down over their ears, away they glided over the ice in the best of spirits, and hearts free from care.

Had they known what was coming they might not have been so gay, but they did not, and their pleasure was therefore entirely free from alloy.

They could hear the wolves howling upon the hills and in the woods, but as they saw none and the cries did not appear to be very near, they did not fret, but glided on, chatting merrily and promising themselves great sport on the morrow.

They reached the house of Kit's mother soon after dark, and after a good supper, for which their skate had given them a good appetite, and an evening spent in genial conversation, they retired, intending to be up bright and early in the morning.

It might have been something past midnight when Ned was awakened by hearing a suspicious sound outside, and getting up, he threw on a portion of his clothes and his shoes, and going to the window, looked out.

He slept in a little room by himself overlooking the back yard, and by the dim light, for the moon was now obscured by heavy clouds, he could see half a dozen forms moving about in the direction of the hen house and pig pen.

They were not men, he could see plainly, and consequently they must be wolves looking for something to eat.

He had left his rifle below, and quickly slipping off his shoes, he descended without noise, and then putting them on again, procured his rifle, saw that it was all right, and then proceeded to one of the back windows, which he quietly raised.

He could see one of the wolves, a lean, gaunt fellow, sniffing around the house where the pigs were kept, and trying to get in. So raising his rifle, he was about to fire upon the brute, when he felt himself seized around the neck, dragged out of the window bodily, and put upon his feet outside.

The wolves immediately scampered away with frightened yelps, and then the lad felt himself lifted up once more by two men, bound, gagged, and blindfolded by them, and hurried swiftly away, and thrown into a sled drawn by a horse.

He could hear the bells jingle, and hear the animal breathing, though he could see nothing, and did not know how numerous were his captors, or where they intended taking him.

The sled drove off, one man sitting on the box and another upon the seat beside Ned, and holding on to him to prevent him falling, while behind him, if he mistook not, was still another man.

The sled, which was nothing but a rude box on runners, made good time, but Ned could not see where they were going, though he judged that they were on the river, after a little while, the sound of waving limbs being absent, and the click of the horse's hoofs being different from the dull sound which they had previously made.

After traveling upward of half an hour the sled stopped, and Ned was lifted out and carried by two men a considerable distance.

Then he was put upon his feet and the bandage removed from his eyes, and the gag from his mouth, his hands and feet being left secured as before.

Wherever he was it was as dark as pitch, and he could not see either the men who had brought him here or what sort of place it might be.

"Who's runnin' this 'ere racket, I'd like to know?" he asked. "I

think you've got an awful nerve to take a feller away like this. What d'ye mean by it?"

No one answered him, though he could hear whispering, and finally this ceased, the sound of the men's footsteps being faintly heard as they walked away, leaving the boy alone and in darkness.

Having nothing else to do, Ned began to whistle for his own amusement, and, without regard to the noise he made, the notes being particularly clear and shrill, and echoing repeatedly.

"Aha, I'm in a cave," thought Ned, who was a keen observer. "If it was in a house there wouldn't be a sharp echo like that, it would be duller. Wonder where it is?"

Then he began whistling again, but was soon stopped by hearing a surly growl, and a snappish bark like that of a wolf.

In the darkness he could see a pair of glistening eyes, which steadily came nearer, as if the wolf to whom they belonged was about to leap upon him.

Horror! he had been left in a den of wolves to be devoured alive!

He could see but one pair of eyes, though he did not doubt that there were more of the terrible animals near at hand, and he shuddered at the thought of his fate.

He had faced death in this form before, and had escaped, but for all that the prospect was not inviting, and he could not but feel anxious lest his previous good fortune should at last fail him.

Suddenly he heard a sound which restored his drooping spirits, and he said scornfully:

"Gosh! who's a-scared at a tame wolf with a chain tied to him? I heard it clanking just this minute. He can't get at me anyhow, 'cause I know by the sound that I've got room enough to get away if he comes at me. H'm, didn't I tell you?"

A sudden clinking of the chain, indicating that the wolf had come to the end of it, and was suddenly checked, proved the correctness of Ned's supposition, and he laughed derisively.

"Who's afraid o' your old chained wolf?" he sneered. "Ye ain't goin' to frighten me that way, so you might just as well light up and let me have the show in good style."

Then he began to whistle shrill and clear once more, when he was suddenly interrupted by a gruff voice, which said:

"Shut up that noise if you don't want your blasted young throat cut!"

"You go to thunder!" said Ned, saucily. "They ain't no law agin' whistlin', and if you think you kin stop me, just come and try it. What's the harm, anyhow? It's deuced dull and lonesome here, and I want something to keep me company. I've give up smokin', an' so I've got to whistle."

"Don't do it so loud, then," said the same voice. "You make noise enough to wake the dead. Sit down and take it easy. You can go to sleep if you want to. There ain't anything goin' to happen to-night."

Ned felt around and saw that there was a long bench near him, that is to say, he discovered it by the sense of touch, for it was still as dark as Erebus, and, stretching himself out, he was soon as fast asleep as though he were still safe with Kit in the house whence he had been so rudely abducted.

CHAPTER XII.

ON THE TRACK—UNEXPECTED AND STARTLING NEWS.

GREAT was the surprise of Kit King upon coming down the next morning to find the back window open and Ned's little rifle lying upon the snow outside.

The sight of the tracks of wolves around the house, mingling with what he took to be Ned's footprints, gave him considerable alarm, which was in no wise diminished when he ran up into the boy's room and found that he was missing.

He at once came to the conclusion that Ned, hearing wolves about the house in the night, had gone to shoot them and had been eaten by them.

He called Doc, and the two examined the tracks, when Doc exclaimed suddenly:

"There are no traces of blood, no scattered bones. Let us follow these tracks a little further."

"By George! do you see these footprints?" cried Kit. "Look! they are not all the same size. Here are Ned's, and here are some considerably larger."

"And Ned's cease altogether, at this point, and the others are plainer."

"I have it. The boy has been carried away. Some one has lifted him up, and that is why we do not see his tracks for but a short distance."

"And they began at the window, too, did you notice?"

"Let us follow them a little further, Doc. There is a mystery here. At first there were but two men, as indicated by the footprints, and now there are evidently three."

"And this third man has tramped about in the snow impatiently, while waiting for the others to come up."

"So he has; for, see here, they all lead off plainly now toward the woods."

"What is this?" asked Kit, presently, after they followed the tracks a little further. "The track is made by a sleigh or sled, and horses' hoofs. They have taken the lad off upon a sled."

"Could he have gone willingly?"

"No; for then there would have been no sign of a struggle, and he would have taken his rifle."

"All these things may have been done to deceive."

"No, no; Ned is not that sort of boy. He is too much attached to me to run away in that shape. No, Doc, you can rest assured that some of his old enemies have abducted him."

"They could not get into the house."

"No, but they have enticed him down upon some pretext—perhaps he did actually come to the window to shoot the wolves—and have then got away with him."

"See, the trail leads to the river now. That would afford a good road, and leave but little trace."

"You are right; they have taken to the river, for this path leads directly to it. Let us see which way they went—up or down."

When the two young men reached the river, however, the trail was completely lost.

They could see where the sled had struck the ice, the tracks being visible for several yards; but when they came to a spot where the wind would have a good sweep they were lost.

The sled had evidently gone in a straight course, and at right angles to the bank up to this point; but whether it had kept straight across, or gone either up or down, could not be ascertained.

"Let us go back and have our breakfast, get our skates, and then continue the search," said Kit. "We may possibly find the trail again upon the other side. An hour, more or less, cannot make any difference now, for they have probably hidden the lad away somewhere by this time."

The two friends returned at once to the house, where they found a hot breakfast awaiting them; and then Kit told his mother what he suspected had happened during the night.

The good woman was greatly surprised and very indignant, and declared that no punishment could be too bad for men who would carry off a harmless little fellow like Ned.

Then Kit told her of how he had rescued the lad from a terrible death at the hands of Donald Allen and his cronies, adding:

"The boy knows too much, mother; and, believe me, they mean to get rid of him, so that there will be no chance of his informing upon them."

"But you possess the same information, my son."

"True, but I am not so easy to get rid of as this boy. I'll bet a dollar that Rufe and Rube Reynolds and some one just like 'em had a hand in this business."

"They're mean enough to do it," answered Doc; "and yet this may be only a trick to get hold of you. They know that you will try to find the boy, and they may make the trail purposely plain in order to lead you on, and when you are far from home and alone, set upon you in a body and murder you."

"I know that they had some such plan on foot, for Ned overheard them plotting the whole thing, but they don't catch me going into the trap with my eyes open."

"You must not go alone in this business. You must get George and Joe and half a dozen of the boys to go with you. I, of course, will make one of the party."

"That is a good idea," answered Kit, "and will show these fellows that they cannot abduct a boy with impunity."

"If necessary, we will get the whole village out after him," Doc said, with spirit. "Ned is a great favorite now, and if you and I

and Mark make a fuss over this thing we will frighten those fellows into giving him up."

"It must be a plan against me, as you suggest, Doc, and when the villains see that the whole sentiment of the place is against them they will quietly release the boy, and we shall have no more trouble from them, unless——"

"Unless what?"

"Unless they think he knows too much for their good. In that case they may get rid of him summarily and lay the blame upon the wolves."

"Then our best plan is to expose them at once to the squire and order an investigation. They will find the scalps all reckoned up, in order that the prize may be awarded, and their dishonest practices will avail them nothing."

"I have a good mind, Kit, when this thing is settled, to get all the boys together, go to Don's ranch, kill every wolf in it, and take their scalps, dividing them equally among us all, including Don and Bart and his two sons."

"Not a bad idea; but now, as you have finished your breakfast, suppose we try and find this trail again."

"I've got an idea, Kit."

"What is it?"

"That the boy has been taken to that mysterious cave that we were in the other night."

"Nonsense! Nobody knows of its existence. You, yourself, who have lived here as long as anyone, admitted that you had never heard of it before."

"We may have been seen coming out of it by some of these fellows, and they, thinking it a good place, resolved to hide the boy there."

"In that case we would know just where to find him. No, no! they would not be so foolish as that."

"They might keep him there a little while, and then take him elsewhere. They could stop there a day, and then go on by night to some other place."

"Provided they merely wanted to keep a captive, but it is necessary to argue upon the assumption of their desiring to kill him at once. In that case they would not go where we would be likely to follow immediately."

"Perhaps not, at any rate, let's set out and see what we can find."

In a few moments they had reached the spot where the tracks ceased, and then, gliding across to the opposite bank, searched up and down for a continuation of the trail.

It was not to be found, however, and the conclusion was forced upon them that the sled had proceeded directly up or downstream, upon the ice, to some point which they had not discovered.

"Suppose we do go to the cave," said Kit, at length. "I do not much think we shall find them there, but there is no harm in looking."

"Do you believe you could find it again?"

"Certainly. Now, let's be off."

Away they sped over the ice, the wind whistling about them, keeping close to the shore in order to be on the lookout for signs, and in about fifteen minutes they reached what they supposed to be the vicinity of the cave in the woods.

Suddenly Kit espied something, and he called out excitedly:

"Here are the sleigh tracks, and the tracks of the horse's hoofs. we have got that much, anyhow."

"And the footprints of three men," continued Doc, following up the signs. "Now, then, let us see if they do not lead to the ravine."

They had gone some little distance, the tracks being plainly seen in the snow, and leading directly to the ravine, when they suddenly paused.

"Some one is calling us," said Kit; "don't you hear them?"

Both men listened an instant, and then heard a hallo borne on the winds, in which their names were mingled.

"Hallo! Hal-lo! Kit! K-i-t! Hal-loo! Doc! Kit! where are you?"

"It comes from the river," said Kit. "Let us go back. The boy may have been found."

They started back toward the river at once, and presently the cry was heard again, with an increased volume of sound.

"Hallo! Kit, Doc, where are you?"

Kit shouted in return, and then an answering shout greeted his ears; and upon striking the river again he beheld his friends and a large number of the villagers.

He was surprised to see Rube and Rufe and two or three other fellows of equally bad reputation in the crowd, but said nothing, George Cook immediately putting the question:

"Heard the news?"

"About Ned Rowell's being carried away? Yes; and Doc and I are trying to find him."

"I didn't know anything about that till I stopped at your house," said George. "And that isn't what I mean."

"What then? Has anyone——"

"Your two sisters have been carried away, and no one knows anything about it. The Indians hereabouts are suspected."

"Susie carried away!" cried Kit; and overcome with emotion he nearly fainted.

CHAPTER XIII.

AN UNAVAILING SEARCH—THE SIEGE.

"NELLIE carried off!" cried Doc. "Then it is you who have done it, Rufe Reynolds, for I know you have dared to love her, and have been long suspected of having such a plan in your mind."

Rufus turned as red as his name indicated, and then, in a blustering tone, replied:

"It ain't so, and you know it. I did like the gal, though I 'low she never keered fur me much, but I ain't the sort of a feller to tote her away without her leave."

"Rufe never left the house last night," said Reuben, in defense of his brother, "and we never knowed nothin' about it till this mornin', when we was comin' down to the hunt."

"When did it happen?" asked Kit, recovering himself with an effort.

"Sometime in the early evening," replied Joe Deane. "Doc's mother told us about it this morning, and neither Rufe nor Rube knew about it till they come down to tell us what Don Allen proposes."

"What is that?"

"Why, he says that he has come to the conclusion that it isn't square to keep a wolf ranch, and so he has invited us all to go up there and kill 'em all off."

Kit and Doc exchanged meaning glances, and the former thought to himself:

"The old reprobate must have suspected our design, and this role of honest man is suddenly assumed to cover up his former rascalities."

"He offers to give a keg of whisky to the man who can show the most scalps when the thing is over," said Will Harris, "and wants everybody to come up and have a big dinner when it's all done. It will be a jolly fight, for the wolves are as savage as the old Nick."

"It's a good scheme," said Rufe, "and the old man ain't no slouch, fur all that some fellers has been down on him and tryin' to ruin his chances of making a living."

"Did his living depend on throwing an innocent boy to the wolves, Rufe Reynolds?" demanded Kit, angrily. "Don Allen is an old rascal, and you and yours are no better, and I don't care who knows it. It's well for him that he has made this proposition."

"What fur, may I ax?"

"Because if he hadn't, Doc and I would have taken a crowd up there and killed every wolf in his pen."

"So we would," cried Kit's friends, and Rufe saw that he and his cronies were in a decided minority.

"And more than that," said Kit, now thoroughly excited, "if he and you, and other fellows like you, don't stop your nonsense, the quicker you go to another part of the State the better. Everybody knows how your father and Don Allen would have sacrificed Ned Rowell but for my interference, and I know, too, what your plans were concerning me."

"That's a nice way to talk to a fellow when he comes to help yer find yer sister what's been run away with by Injuns," said Steve French, one of Rufe's friends. "Jes' as soon as Rufe heard it, he said he was willin' to do what he could to git the young gals back to their friends, and now you go to insultin' him to his mouth. It's blamed rough, that's what it is, and if I was Rufe I'd give ye a dressin' down for it."

"Perhaps you'd like to do it on your own account," said Kit, advancing.

"Oh, it ain't no bizness of mine," answered Steve, backing away.

"I on'y was sayin' what I'd do if I was Rufe."

"You're bad enough as you are without being any worse."

"Oh, well, if they don't want your help," said Rufe, "let's go home, but it's hard on a feller to be suspected when he offers to do ye a good turn."

"I don't want your help," said Kit, hotly; "and as for being suspected, your past actions are to blame for that. If you had a good reputation you would not be suspected."

"Will ye come to the wolf hunt?" asked Reuben, giving his brother a sly wink which Kit was quick enough to observe.

"No, for I believe you're up to mischief," answered Kit. "The whole thing is a plot, and I won't have anything to do with it. You may tell Don Allen, though, that if he don't slaughter off all those wolves, old and young, by the time the week is out, that we will come up and do it for him."

"So we will, the old rogue!" cried George, Joe, Will, and a dozen others.

"And now you'd better make tracks," continued Kit, "for if I find that you have had anything to do with this abduction, I'll make the whole State too hot to hold you."

"Ye don't suspect us, do ye?" asked Rube and Rufe together.

"Yes, I do, although appearances seem to be in your favor this time. I'll bet that you know about Ned, too. What have you done with him?"

"Nothin', we ain't seed him since you was up to Don's. And don't ye get to feelin' so smart, Kit King, for I mought have a chance to get even with you some day when all yer friends wasn't around. Ye're mighty chipper when ye've got them to back yer."

"And when I have not," answered Kit, "I can take care of myself. None of your black looks, Rufe Reynolds, because I won't have them. Now, boys, let us strike into the woods. There is a cave here where I think we will find Ned and perhaps get some news of the girls."

Rufe and his friends hung back, while the others proceeded into the wood led by Kit and Doc, and in a few minutes the disappointed ruffians went their own way muttering vengeance, but taking care that no one heard their threats.

Meanwhile Kit and his party had reached the ravine and had gone to the further end without finding the entrance to the cave.

"I know this is the place," said Kit, "for I recognize it, but I see nothing that looks like a cave."

"The outlet was large," spoke up Doc, "and ought to be readily found, but I don't see it, and more than that, the tracks which led so plainly down here have now entirely disappeared."

"The crust is so hard that one leaves no traces. We leave none ourselves, remarked Kit. "Let us search the place thoroughly, and maybe we shall find what we seek."

A close search, however, conducted by all hands, revealed nothing but bare rocks, tree trunks and clinging roots of vines, there being not the slightest opening large enough for even a wolf to crawl in.

Kit was completely baffled, though he felt certain that he was in the right place, as did Doc also, and neither of them could understand why they could not find the way into the cave.

Thinking that perhaps the entrance might be concealed by some mechanical contrivance as a sliding slab, or a boulder moved by a lever like a tree trunk, or a wedge of rock, Kit carefully sounded the face of the cliff and pushed against every tree or root which might possibly be the lever he was looking for.

The trees did not push aside and disclose any cavity, nor did the rocks give out any but a dull sound, and not the hollow echo which he expected, the result of all his careful scrutiny being an utter failure to find the cave.

"And yet I know it is here somewhere, and that by proper hunting we are bound to find it. The entrance being closed proves to me that the mysterious dweller of the cave shuns us and wishes to keep us out."

"But before, when we knew nothing about the cave, we walked right into it in the dark, and in the morning the path out was straight before us. I am as sure as you are, Kit, that this is the ravine, but where is the cave?"

"That is a question I cannot answer. There may be more than

one entrance, though, and what do you say to trying to find it? We had better leave some of the boys here so that if anyone does come out or try to get in, as is barely possible, we can intercept them."

"A good plan; let us adopt it."

Leaving half a dozen men in the ravine, Kit and Doc ascended to the level of the wood and hunted along the top of the ledge for an opening to the supposed cave, but with no greater success than before.

They searched for hours without finding anything, and at last were forced to admit that they had come to the wrong place, or, if the cave were here, the entrance was hidden beyond their finding it.

Not to be balked, they determined to watch the place carefully, and therefore they at once set about making an encampment in the place; a certain number to remain on guard constantly, and be relieved in turns by the others and supplied by them with food.

A fire was started, and a shelter built of boughs, intertwined with twigs and thatched over with moss, branches being placed on this and snow packed above the whole.

Before dark a secure and warm shelter had been made, the warmth of the fire making it most cozy and almost as good as a house.

The fire was kept brightly burning all the time, and three men were constantly on guard all night, being relieved at intervals of three hours, one new man coming every hour and taking the place of one of the guards.

Those that were not on guard went off and soon returned with a good supply of game, which was cooked for their comrades; after which the latter were left alone for the night.

In the morning a new squad was put on guard, while the others returned to their homes to get more recruits and to tell their friends where they had been.

At night the guard was relieved again, and a third party went into camp, the others scouring the woods for miles around in search of the missing girls or Ned.

And all this time, while the ravine was in a state of siege, as it might be, Ned Rowell was safely hidden away within a hundred feet of where the fire was, unable to get out or to inform his friends of his whereabouts.

He was in the very cave where Kit and Doc had spent the night after having been lost in the snow, the entrance to which they had not found, although they had passed it a hundred times.

CHAPTER XIV.

TWO LAMBS IN THE POWER OF WOLVES.

SHORTLY after dark, upon the day when Kit, Doc and Ned set out a messenger came to Doc's house and said that the young men had both fallen upon the ice and hurt themselves badly, that they were at Mark Carrington's, and desired very much to see their sweethearts.

The two girls, never suspecting any wrong, accompanied the messenger in a sleigh, which he had ready, and were soon dashing along the river on the ice at a brisk pace, chatting merrily the while, as young girls will, no matter what may be going on.

The night was not very dark, and although they talked a good deal, the girls looked out now and then to see how far they had gone, as they were anxious to reach Carrington's house as soon as possible.

Suddenly Nellie, Kit's sister, looked around and exclaimed:

"You have passed the house. Where are you going?"

"The bank is too steep to go ashore here, miss, and I've got to go below a piece, where I can drive up better."

"We can walk," said Susie. "It is not far, and we will save time by doing so."

"Beg parding, miss, but I don't think you can. It's only a little bit further, anyhow, and I'll take you right up to the door without getting so much as your toes wet."

He had not gone far, however, before he had met a man on the ice, who whispered something to him which the girls could not make out.

"The boys has been taken to Kit's house, young ladies," he said, "and I'll drive you there in just ten minutes, so don't you worry. You won't know when you get there, I'll go so fast."

The moon was obscured for some time after that, and neither of the young ladies thought of looking about them for quite awhile, when Susie, who knew the locality of Kit's home very well, suddenly cried out:

"You have gone way past the house. I don't believe you know

where you are going at all. Turn back; we shall be awful late, and the wind is getting real cold."

The man whipped up his horse and said in surly tones:

"Maybe I don't know where I am goin' better than you."

"I don't believe you do," replied Susie. "You haven't lived here as long as I have, and are not acquainted about here. I never saw you before, and no stranger can know as much of the place as I do."

"That's all aight, miss, but I guess I know where I'm going, so just you keep quiet."

"Something is wrong," whispered Nellie. "Let us get out. I don't like this fellow, and I am afraid this is a plot. I'm going to jump out."

The man had started his horse at an increased speed, however, and had taken the middle of the stream, where the ice was like glass, and where a fall would surely result in a serious injury.

The poor girls were afraid to risk springing out, and as the familiar places flew by and they approached a region with which they were not acquainted, they gave way to the bitterest despair.

Suddenly the man guided his steed toward the shore and soon drove swiftly up the bank and under the trees, heavily laden with snow, stopping so suddenly as to throw his passengers from their seats into the snow.

Before they could extricate themselves the two young ladies were seized by masked men and hurried away to a lonely cabin situated in a deep wood, and which could not be seen until one was fairly at the door.

They were taken into a room where a bright fire was burning, by the side of which sat an old crone in a high-backed chair, fast asleep.

One of the men, still masked, aroused the creature, who got up, grinned, and said in a croaking voice, which grated harshly on the ear:

"So you've brought the pretty birds to the nest, have ye? Ho, ho, but they don't seem to take kindly to it. Never mind, never mind, they will soon get used to it."

"What is the meaning of this conduct?" demanded Nellie. "Why have we been abducted in this manner?"

"Because I was bound to have ye, whether ye would or not," replied one of the men.

Susie darted forward, and tearing the mask from the fellow's face, cried angrily:

"I know you, Rufe Reynolds, so it is useless to try and disguise yourself further. You did well to conceal your ugly face, for I hate the very sight of it."

"You're mighty spunky, ain't ye?" said the other man. "Well, I love spunk, if there ain't too much of it, and you've got to tone yours down a little afore ye marry me."

"I will never marry you, Reuben Reynolds, so make up your mind to that. You needn't take off your mask, for I know you without, and your face isn't any handsomer than your brother's. You're a pair of ugly villains, and one look at your faces is enough to sicken me."

"We ain't pooty," answered Rufe, with a grin, removing his mask, "but good looks don't count for everythin' in this town. We're as good fellers as the next ones, and ye won't get any better husbands, so ye mought ez wull make yer mind up to that 'ere ter wanst."

"Stand aside," cried Nellie, indignantly. "Our brothers will pay you well for this insolence when they hear of it."

"When they do, it'll be too late, fur we're goin' to make ye our wives to-night. We've got a couple o' contracks, and all ye got to do is to put your ortygrabs to 'em and the thing is done."

"That's all," said Rufe, his brother having been the first speaker. "That's law in this 'ere State o' Minnesoty, and no parson ain't required where ye can't get one handy."

"Show me this contract," said Susie, while poor Nellie shuddered, thinking that her friend was going to consent.

"Don't do it, Susie," she cried, but the brave girl, who had no intention of acceding to the scoundrel's wishes, silenced her with a look.

"Let me see the contract," she repeated. "If I am to sign anything I wish to know what it is."

"That's all fair and square," replied Reuben, "and I'se glad ter see ye comin' round. Here's the paper," and he drew a sheet from his breast pocket, upon which were written the following words:

"WE, THE UNDERSIGNED, agree to live together as man and wife according to the laws of God and the State of Minnesota, and to this

agreement we have hereunto set our hands and seals in the presence of witnesses, this — day of —, and year 18—.

Signed,

— — —
— — —

"Witnesses,

— — —
— — —

Susie read this as the man held it out, and then said:

"Put it down on the table. I can't sign it while you hold it in your hand."

Reuben put the instrument upon the rude table, holding it firmly by one edge, however, while Rufe got out an old horn inkstand and a couple of quill pens, and a box of wafers to be used as seals.

Susie filled her pen and bent over the document as if intending to write her name in the place indicated, the old woman and Rufus looking on as witnesses.

Reuben, overjoyed at finding the young girl so docile, when he had expected the most bitter resistance, forgot his caution in his excitement, and considerably relaxed his grasp upon the paper to which Susie appeared about to sign her name.

With the quickness of thought, the girl pulled it away with her left hand, and wheeling suddenly around, threw it upon the blazing logs, where the flames quickly rendered it perfectly useless as a legal document or anything else.

"There," she cried in triumph. "That's what I would do with you, sooner than marry you. Where's your precious contract now?"

Reuben swore a terrible oath, and shook his clenched fist at the daring girl, who stood before him in an attitude of defiance, Nellie having retreated to a corner, and the old woman chuckling to herself as she stood watching the different members of this striking group.

Rufe was the only one who did not appear to be excited, and with a coarse laugh he said:

"That's all right, they ain't no use gettin' mad at that. We've got another contrack, and we kin make a copy of it, or the gals kin, fur all I kin do is to write my name, and I don't read, only printin'."

"The other one will do for both on us," said Reuben, "and all hands kin sign at the bottom, you and your gal together and me and mine together under yourn. It's a family matter anyhow, and one dockyment is as good as two."

"I will do the same with the second as with the first," cried Susie. "I hope you understand that I defy and despise you, and that you can never make us submit to your will."

"We'll see about that, my lady," said Rufe. "We've got the upper hand whether ye knows it or not, and kin show ye thar ain't no dodgin' us, 'cause we're bound to win."

"Make up your minds to it, dearies, make up your minds," croaked the hideous old hag. "Ye're far away from anybody, and these boys are desperate. They'll win somehow, let me tell you, by fair means or foul, and as I am an honest old creeter, you'd better make up your mind first as well as last, 'cause ye've got to come to it."

"Shame upon you!" cried Nellie, facing the speaker. "How dare you call yourself an honest woman and counsel submission to these brutes."

"Ye'll have to come to it, and if ye prefer to be ruined creatures to honest wives, ye'll stand out against these clever boys. Take my advice and do as they say rather than——"

"Silence, hag!" cried Susie, in a burst of indignation. "This terrible alternative will not be forced upon us. Help is at hand. I know it, I feel it. So beware, villains, what you do, for your punishment will be terrible."

"Do you suppose we would marry you without a clergyman?" said Susie, making up her mind to temporize. "Bring a minister here and we will listen to you. You can get one in the village."

"Will you have us if we get a parson?" asked Rufe.

"Bring one whom we know. There is Mr. Brown, or a justice of the peace, like Squire Jones, and we may listen to you, but otherwise we won't."

"That's all right," muttered Rufe to his brother. "We kin collar the parson and make him tie ther knot. The muzzle of a revolver pressed against his head will do the business."

"All right; we'll fetch him in the mornin'," said Rufe. "Mother Vixen, show these 'ere gals to their rooms."

The old crone took the young ladies to a loft over the room where they were, which was without doors or windows, and approached only by a ladder placed under a trap, and then she left them, removing the ladder when she had descended.

Clasped in each other's arms, the poor girls resolved to resist their tormentors to the last, but it was fortunate that they did not know how severely their strength and courage would be tried, or they might have utterly broken down.

CHAPTER XV.

NED AND THE HERMIT.

WHERE was Ned Rowell all the time that Kit and his friends were so diligently searching?

He was in the hermit's cave, and we will at once proceed to explain how he was concealed so that no one could find him.

When he awoke in the morning he saw the wolf, which had alarmed him the night before until he had discovered that it was chained, lying in one corner, and near it stood an old-looking man, with a long beard, talking to it.

"Halloo, old gentleman! Are you giving your pet his breakfast?" asked Ned, advancing. "You can't scare me with chained wolves, so you needn't try it again. I'm fly to that racket, I am."

The old man looked up, and seemed strangely agitated at the sound of the lad's voice, passing his hand across his forehead as if trying to recall some long-forgotten memories.

"Who are you, my boy?" he asked, in an eager tone.

"First tell me who you are, and what you brought me to this 'ere cave for," said Ned. "I ain't to be kidnapped like as if I wasn't nobody, and the boys will be on my track mighty quick—Kit and Doc and the rest."

"I did not kidnap you, my boy," said the man, "and I would not harm a hair of your head for the world. You were brought here by two men. Who they were I must not say, but if they harm you, woe betide them. Tell me your name."

"You give me your word, dead sure, honest Injun, that them chaps shan't hurt me?"

"I swear it."

"Well, my name's Ned Rowell, and I come from New York. I'm a terror, I am, and when I meet a friend I stick to him closer than stick-in-plaster, you bet. I'm little, but when I get riled I make things hotter than a swarm of hornets."

"Your name is Ned Rowell, you say?" asked the old hermit.

"That's it, as far as I know. The old nigger woman what I lived with, which everybody said was a witch, she used to say she could lay her hand on my dad, but she never did, and that's where I'm in the dark. I s'pose I had a dad, but I'm blessed if I know where or who he is."

"You have no parents?" asked the hermit.

"Not as I knows of, old gentleman, and as everybody else has 'em, I think it's kind o' rough on a fellow. I don't see why I shouldn't have 'em as well as other folks. I ain't no fool, and so why shouldn't I have a father or mother?"

"You do not remember ever having seen them?"

"No, not once. I don't remember anybody but the old nigger woman, and she wasn't my mother, I know, 'cause I'm white and she was black as the ace of clubs. She never told me who my dad was, though she often said she could lay her hands on him if she liked. I wish she had, 'cause I would like to know him first-rate."

"Do you know why you were brought here, my boy?" asked the hermit.

"No, I don't, unless it's that blasted Rufe what did it. Him and his old man are down on me, I know, 'cause I gave 'em away to Kit and the other fellows, and said I'd tell Squire Jones, and so I will, consarn 'em. They are nothing but frauds, and I don't care who knows it. They wanted to chuck me to the wolves, but Kit wouldn't let 'em."

"Whom do you say would not let them throw you to the wolves, boy?" asked the old man.

"Kit King; he's a brick. Do you know him?"

"Clifford King is his name, is it?"

"Yes, I guess so, though I never called him anything but Kit. He's a real first-class trump, he is, and I'd do anything for him, I would—him and Doc. I was going to live at Kit's, and it was only last night I was taken away from there by those two men."

"What two men?"

"I dunno, 'less it was Rufe and his dad, or maybe his father, or perhaps Don Allen. He don't like me for a cent, 'cause I said I'd tell Kit about his plans."

"And these two men carried you off?"

"Yes, I guess so—Rufe and Rufe—Fire and Brimstone, they calls 'em. You don't know Becky, their sister, do you? She's wuss'n the old Scratch, and the old woman is worse yet. I tell you, they're a pleasant family to git mixed up with. Why, they're as bad as a pack o' wolves. I wouldn't want to meet 'em in the woods after dark unless I had three or four guns with me."

"You must be hungry, my lad," said the hermit. "Follow me, and I will give you a good breakfast."

"And then you'll let me out of this place, won't you?" asked Ned, following his strange conductor to an inner part of the cave, where a fire was crackling merrily, a piece of venison roasting over it.

"When it is safe you shall depart, never fear."

"What's your name, anyhow?" asked Ned, helping himself to a chunk of the venison, and eating it with a great relish. "'Tain't convenient to call you old gentleman all the time, and perhaps you don't like it yourself."

"My name matters not, boy, but if you like, you may call me Tom—Hermit Tom. I have lived here many years, and thought to never more converse with a human being."

"Don't you find it lonesome? I shouldn't like it for a cent. Ain't you got no wife nor children? I don't see the fun o' living all alone in a cave like this with a wolf for company. You can't tame them fellows, you know, for they'll always be full of the old Nick, no matter how well you treat 'em."

"Wife and child—wife and child," repeated the old man, his eyes glistening and his lips twitching nervously. "Why do you speak to me of wife and child?"

"'Cause I thought you might have had 'em once, Mr. Hermit. If they're dead I'm sorry I said anything, 'cause I don't want to make you feel bad. If you are an old codger what lives in a cave, I reckon you are got feelings as well as anyone else, and I don't want to hurt 'em."

"I had a wife once, and a child, too—a merry, handsome boy," continued the hermit, evidently not heeding what Ned had said. "He was a beautiful boy, and the pride of my heart. Oh, how I loved him!"

"Did he die, sir?" asked Ned.

"No, he was stolen from me by a fiend—a she fiend—a woman without a heart, without remorse, without pity. She took him to bring up to a life of crime, of shame. Oh, the remorseless cruelty of the hag. Had she killed him I would not have grieved, but this was worse than death."

"I'd just like to see that woman, and tell her what I think of her," said Ned, excitedly. "She's a vixen, that's what she is, and I'd just as lief say it to her face."

"My poor wife never survived the shock, and in a few months I laid her away in the grave, while I began my search for my boy. My poor brain was shattered, and I know not for how many years that I wandered about, my intellect darkened and my mind a blank."

"You have awakened my memories, boy, and have caused the tears to flow, the source of which I thought had long been scorched and burned away. But there is no hope, and nothing is left to me but live in solitude and silence, far away from my home and friends."

"You haven't seen that wicked woman what stole your boy away, have you?" asked Ned, sympathetically.

"Seen her, boy! No, I have not, and they told me she was dead. Could I see her I would force the truth from her wicked lips. I would tear her in pieces if she did not tell me where he was."

"Serve her right, the vixen," replied Ned, with great vigor.

"What do you say, boy?" cried the old man, suddenly. "You know her?"

"Me? No, of course I don't; I only said she was a vixen."

"That is it, I remember now. She was called by that name, Mother Vixen, and well she deserved it."

"Mother Vixen! Why, by Crackey! I know an old woman called Mother Vixen in these parts, and they say she's a regular old witch. She lives up in——"

"What are you talking about, you young scamp?" cried a gruff voice, and looking up Ned saw Rufe standing before him.

"You darned old red-headed skunk," roared Ned, springing to his

feet; "it was you what brought me here, and I want to know what for. You'll be gitting yourself in trouble if you come any more of your fresh dodges."

"Shut up, yer young'wolf whelp, or I'll put my fist down yer throat! I fotched ye here for a blind, that's what, an' I reckon Kit King will fall nicely inter the trap."

"You'll have ter set up all night, Mr. Rufe, afore ye get him in a trap."

"You keep quiet and I won't hurt ye, 'cause ye ain't done much, 'cept to bone on us about the wolf ranch, and that's Don Allen's business; but if you don't close your mouth I'll do it for yer, so mind that."

"Yer ain't man enough!" snapped Ned, with a grin and a chuckle, throwing a bit of bone at the scoundrel and taking him square in the eye with it, causing him to howl with pain.

The man gave one bound, and catching the boy by the collar, raised him from his feet, and in another instant would have hurled him into the fire.

At that moment the hermit raised his staff and struck Rufe a heavy blow across the face, causing him to release the boy, who fell to the ground just away from the fire.

"Harm but a hair of that lad's head and you die!" hissed the old man. "When you and your companions brought him here I did not complain, but you shall not touch him if I can prevent it."

"Consarn your old white head," yelled Rufe, drawing his knife, "you've knocked my brains clean out. If that young tyke gives me sass I'm goin' ter lick him, and you can't stop me!"

"Advance at your peril!" said the other, standing in front of Ned and facing the villain fearlessly. "Depart from this cave, lest I strike you dead at my feet. Dare to enter it again at your own risk!"

"Curse you for an old fool," growled the discomfited villain. "I'll get even with ye yet, though I wanted to fetch two gals here this afternoon."

Then he departed, leaving Ned alone with the strange old man, the boy wondering greatly at the latter's interference in his behalf.

CHAPTER XVI.

A MEETING OF FRIENDS.

"You're a queer old fellow," muttered Ned. "What did ye hit that feller across the head for, Mr. Hermit?"

"Because he would have harmed you, and because he is a villain. He and another brought you here this morning, and told me to keep you until they came again."

"That was his brother Rube."

"No, he did not call him that, and the other did not seem to be his kin; he called him French."

"By gum! it's Steve French; he's a friend o' Rufe's, and as big a scamp as him. Dan Brown, what owns a piece o' woods, he and Steve French and Bart Reynolds' boys, they all go together, and there's a fine lot of 'em."

"Lest they might come and take you away, I will close up the entrance to the cave," said the hermit, suddenly. "They will not find the one at the top now, as there is too much snow on the rocks, but the lower one is easy to find."

The strange man then went to the further end of the cave, whence Kit and Doc had departed after the night spent in the place, and turning a large boulder upon a pivot, completely blocked up the passage.

Then he pressed down upon a tree trunk which acted as a lever, and this rested firmly against and across the rock, preventing it from being moved an inch.

Then he returned to the cave, and lighting a torch, led Ned into the inner compartment, shutting the heavy wooden door behind him.

This new room was small and not as high as the outer one, was fitted up with couches of soft furs, the walls being hung with the same, and in one corner was a huge fireplace with a chimney hollowed out of the rock by Nature's own hand, the outlet being in the midst of a thick clump of bushes on the top of the ledge.

Ned remained in this cave all day, the hermit being absent occasionally for half an hour at a time, and upon his return seeming to be greatly excited.

He informed Ned that he could hear men outside trying to find the entrance, and that they seemed determined to get in, as they had encamped in the ravine, and narrowly watched every avenue of escape, men being posted all around to intercept anyone that came out.

Ned had no doubt that these men were Rufe and his friends, and he chuckled when the hermit told him of their fruitless efforts to find the entrance of the cave.

Had he had the least suspicion that it was Kit who was trying to get in, the boy would have been much more excited than he was, and would have wanted to go out at once and tell his friend what he had learned.

He did not know this, however, and therefore was it that much fruitless energy was wasted, and much valuable time lost, as the sequel will show.

Night came at last, and Ned fell asleep upon a pile of soft furs in the inner cavern, the hermit lying near him, but passing a restless and wakeful night, frequently arising and pacing nervously up and down, while from time to time he would mutter incoherent sentences to himself, and beat his forehead fiercely with his broad palm.

The next day the same condition of affairs was reported, the siege continuing as before, the men on guard seeming fully determined to prevent the exit of anyone from the cave, or to starve them out.

"There is another way out, did I wish to depart," said the old man, in the course of the day; "but I am in no hurry, and I can stay here all the winter, if necessary. I have food and water and fire, so that it is no discomfort to remain here. Sometimes I don't go out for weeks."

"How long have you been here?" asked Ned.

"Two years—perhaps more. I do not take note of the flight of time. What do I care now, since all hope has fled? It matters not to me how the time goes. Could I find my boy it would not be so."

"How old do you suppose he is by this time, if he is alive? It's funny, ain't it? I'm looking for a dad and you for a boy. Only suppose—"

"What is that you say, boy?"

"I say that it would be funny if—"

"Hark!—what noise is that?"

"It sounds as if someone was outside there in the other cave. There! the wolf is growling. Do you ever turn him loose?"

"Can it be that some one has discovered— I will go outside and see. Remain here, my boy, and if anyone molests you, call for help."

So saying, the old man arose and went out into the larger cavern, Ned listening intently for the slightest sound, but not stirring from his position by the fire.

We will leave the occupants of the cavern for awhile and return to the besieging party, whom we left to see what had become of Ned.

It will be remembered that upon the second day of the siege, Kit, believing that his sister and sweetheart were in the cave, started to go to the top of the ledge in the hope of perhaps finding another entrance thereto, or of discovering some trace of the Reynolds boys, whom he did not think entirely guiltless of the abduction of both Ned and the girls.

While prowling around upon the summit of the rocks with Doc he suddenly saw a wreath of smoke arising at some little distance from him.

"Now where do you suppose that smoke comes from, Doc?" he asked.

"From a fire, of course, and that fire is up here on the rocks among yonder clump of bushes, unless—"

"It comes from the cave below us. That is it exactly. We know the cave is here, though why we could not find the entrance below is more than I can make out."

"Let us go and explore the place, and see, if we can, whence comes this smoke; we may find an opening to the cave."

"Very likely, Doc, but one which it will be impossible to enter, or, if it is big enough, one that will cause us a fine fall to drop into."

"You can't tell, Kit; suppose we try it first. At any rate, we can watch the place, or one of us can, while the other one goes after a rope."

"A good idea, surely, my boy, to swing down there and be a target for the rifles of those fellows below."

"You look on the wrong side, Kit."

"No, I don't; I only exercise proper caution. Those fellows have disappeared, and for all we know may be in the cave now. In that case they would ill brook our dropping in upon them. You know well enough that they are desperate men. I do, at any rate, as I

have already seen of what crimes they are capable. I tremble more for Ned than the girls, for they will not want to harm them."

"No, they probably have some more fiendish scheme on hand. We should have made them give an account of themselves yesterday, instead of driving them away."

"We had no proofs that they were the guilty parties, and if we had expressed our suspicions in words they would have taken the alarm and been put upon their guard."

"I believe they had something to do with it, nevertheless, Kit, for don't you remember, at the time of the grand husking-bee last summer, Becky Reynolds was so sweet on you, and said that you would make a nice big family if Rufe married Nellie and you took her? Rufe has had his eye on Nellie for some time, the impudent rascal, and you may be sure that he has had a hand in this business."

"The scoundrel! Just let us get our sisters safe home again, and if I don't give him a good warming, then I'm mistaken."

By this time they had nearly reached the spot whence the smoke issued, and Kit, hurrying forward, exclaimed excitedly:

"The smoke does come from the cave, and not from some fire on the rocks. By Jove, we'll rout these fellows out, sure pop."

They both hurried forward, and in a few minutes dashed into a heavy mass of shrubbery, in the midst of which was a hole large enough to admit a man, from which smoke was slowly issuing, the snow around the opening being black with the soot which had been deposited upon it.

Kit peered down the hole, and then said to Doc in an excited whisper:

"There seems to be a rough flight of winding steps leading down inside. I am going to descend."

"Take care, then, and if you want any help call on me."

Grasping his rifle in one hand, Kit lowered himself down, and found that there was a sort of spiral staircase winding around the walls of the cavern, which finally led to the bottom.

Hastily descending this, he called out to Doc to follow him—a recommendation which the young man instantly obeyed.

The noise of the echoing voices aroused the hermit, and when he ran into the outer cavern he beheld Kit more than half way down, and Doc not far behind.

"How dare you invade my home?" he cried. "Back, on your lives, or I will slay you like dogs. He whom you seek is under my protection, and if you touch a finger to him you die!"

There was an ominous clicking, and Kit, who had recognized the voice of the hermit, called out:

"Hold! We are not enemies, but friends. Do you not know the two strangers who received the shelter of your cave a few nights ago?"

"What do you seek?"

"A boy called Ned Rowell and two maidens, who have been abducted from their homes by some villains."

At this moment Ned himself ran out and shouted joyously:

"Is that you, Kit?"

"Yes, my boy. Are you all right?"

"You bet!" answered the lad. "They are all right, Mr. Hermit," he continued, addressing the old man; "they are friends of mine."

"Then they are welcome. I did not think that the secret entrance of my cave would ever be discovered, but I am glad that enemies have not found it."

"It was partly by accident," answered Kit, stepping down upon the stone floor. "I thought that the villains were concealed here, and determined to hunt them out. Our men are posted outside, and are determined not to let the rascals escape."

"By Jinks, is it you fellers what have been here for the last two days?" cried Ned, in astonishment. "We thought it was Rufe and his crowd. He was in here yesterday, and it was him what run away with me, the cuss!"

"Where is he now?" asked Doc.

"Dunno, but when he went away I heard him mutterin' suthin' about fetchin' some gals in here, if the old gentleman hadn't chucked him out."

"Some girls! Then, by George, he is the man we suspected, and we have let him go. Nellie and Susie have been carried off, Ned, and we thought they were in here."

"By Jinks, that's tough, but I tell you what to do. Rufe said something about the old woman. I'll bet a cent he meant Mother

Vixen. She's a regular old tiger cat, and 'll do anything bad for money. I'll bet the gals are in her house."

"Mother Vixen!" repeated the hermit. "It is she who stole my boy. Where is she that I may tear her heart out? Put me on the hag's track, and I will force the truth from her, if I have to take her miserable life."

CHAPTER XVII.

TWO WAYS OF OBTAINING INFORMATION.

At these strange words, Kit looked with surprise upon the speaker, and Ned hastily explained what the old man had told him about having lost his son, and been driven crazy by his sorrow.

"I was just sayin' to the old man when you interrupted us," concluded Ned, "that it was kind o' fanny for him to be looking for his son, and me a look——"

"Let us hasten," cried the hermit, breaking in upon Ned's speech. "Where does this Mother Vixen live? Which way shall we take, the upper or the lower?"

"I am afraid it would not be safe to try to go by the ravine," answered Kit. "My friends are posted outside, and would probably fire upon us before we could make ourselves known. Besides that, the other way is the nearest."

"Then we will go that way," replied the old man, putting on a thick fur coat, mittens, and cap, slinging a huge rifle over his shoulder, and taking a pair of snowshoes from a peg stuck in the rock.

Ned was soon fitted out from the old hermit's stock, and then all four started upon their way, the upper air being reached in a short time.

Away they started across the undulating country, now striking rapidly across an open plain, then buried deep in the forest, and again sweeping over some frozen stream, while no sound broke the stillness but the sighing of the wind and the occasional howl of a wolf far away in the distance.

The ferocious creatures did not trouble them, however, and they made rapid progress, presently coming in sight of the house occupied by the hag.

No one was in sight, but smoke was issuing from the huge stone chimney built outside the cabin, and this was a sufficient indication that some one was about.

Kit walked up to the door, and, without ceremony, threw it open and walked in, confronting the old woman, who was cooking her supper at the open fireplace.

"Couldn't ye knock, pig?" she cried, turning a look of rage upon the young man, and rising from a low stool on which she had been sitting.

"Where are the young ladies who have been here?" asked Kit.

"There have been none. Nobody ever comes here, or, if they do, they knock. There hasn't been anyone here."

"Then whose is this?" cried Doc, picking up a little worsted shawl where it lay in a corner on the floor. "You don't wear that. It belongs to Nellie King."

"You're a fool!" snapped the hag. "Clear out of my house, or I'll throw fire over you. I'm not goin' to have my house tramped over by a lot of silly boys. Get out, I tell you."

"Don't be so fresh, granny," said Ned, advancing. "What yer got three plates laid out on the table for if ye ain't got them gals here? You don't need three plates to eat off yerself."

The woman started, and darting a quick glance at Ned, gasped in a frightened whisper:

"Devil take me! I thought the brat was dead."

At that instant the old hermit stepped out in front of the others, and seizing the old woman by the arm, cried fiercely:

"Foul-mouthed hag, murderous witch, crime-stained fiend, where is my boy, my beloved child whom you stole from me? Tell me before I split you from head to foot with this hand."

"Satan and all his imps!" fairly shrieked the woman, falling to her knees and covering her face with one hand. "Take him away! Take him away. It is the dead come to life."

"Where is he, miserable hag—dead?"

"I thought so, but I have seen him. The fiend sends me this vision to torture me. Let go my hand. Your touch burns me. Don't look at me. Go back to your graves, you and the brat. Don't look at me, I shall go mad."

"Speak, woman!" commanded the old man. "Who is this boy that you thought dead—this boy by my side?"

"Don't you know him? You do! you do! and you come here to charge me with my crimes! I haven't seen the brat in years; I thought him dead. The old negress died, and they said the lad had gone first."

"What old negress?" asked Ned, suddenly. "Did she live in New York, and was her name Sal, and did folks say she was a witch, and was she as black as the ace o' clubs? She used to club me sometimes, I know, and I was glad when she died, 'cause then I didn't have nobody to bother me, and could do what I liked."

"Answer me, woman! Who is this boy?" demanded the hermit once more in thunder tones.

"If he's right about the old witch, he's your son, Tom Graham, and I am cheated out of my revenge. I hoped he was dead, and you, too. Let me go, I say; your fingers burn me to the bone."

The man threw the woman from him, and, turning to Ned, caught him in his arms, crying joyously:

"You are my son, my long lost boy, and I knew it not! This is more than I can bear. I have not deserved such happiness, for I have cursed God and upbraided Him with being the cause of my misfortunes."

"Golly, I never thought I should find my dad so easy as all that," said Ned. "It's real fun, isn't it? But, I say, you won't live in a cave all the rest of your life, will you? I don't think it's half as nice as living in a house, do you? I'm awfully glad I've found you; and you know I said that it would be funny if we turned out to be related. At least I was going to say it, but something stopped me."

"Where are the young ladies, woman?" demanded Kit, at this moment, Mother Vixen having risen to her feet and resumed her cooking.

"I don't know," she snarled. "I didn't know they wasn't here of their own accord. They went away this mornin' with the two young fellows."

"Voluntarily?"

"I s'pose so. Anyway, they didn't make no fuss. I understood they was goin' to get married, and they seemed willin' enough."

Both Kit and Doc knew that the woman was lying, and they told her so to her face, and demanded to know where the girls had gone.

Ned ran up the ladder to the loft, and reported that there were no signs of the young ladies up there, and Kit was forced to believe that the woman had partly told the truth, and that the two girls had indeed been carried away, probably by Rufe and his brother.

The old hag would not tell him who the men were that the girls had gone away with, and as for the three plates, she said she was expecting her two sons to supper in a few minutes.

It was already close on to sunset, and Kit, fearing to let another night pass without ascertaining the whereabouts of the girls, and knowing also the danger of being out after dark, so far from the settlement, suggested that they should start for the ravine at once.

Just outside the door they met two evil-looking, rough-clad men, whom Kit knew by sight only, not being aware that they were the sons of Mother Vixen, however, and doubting it even now.

"What be you fellers doin' here?" asked one of the men, putting his hand on his gun.

"Do you know where Rufe Reynolds has taken the two young girls he abducted?" was Kit's reply.

"Didn't know he 'ducted 'em," answered the other. "Me and Josh has been away for three days hunting wolves. We's goin' ter git that rifle what Squire Jones is givin' fur a prize, ain't we, Josh?"

"Sartain," replied the other man. "They ain't no better shots around these parts than us. Don Allen's boys can't hold a candle up to us for shootin', kin they, Joe?"

"You're right they can't, Josh. We just takes all the prizes what's goin'."

"Guess you'll get the cup for havin' the ugliest mugs in all Minnesoty," said Ned, with a laugh. "You're homely enough to frighten rats."

"Well, we ain't over putty, I allow," retorted Josh, with a good-natured grin, "but we kin lick anybody of our size this side of the Rocky Mounts. Rufe tried to lick Joe wunst, and found he'd got hold o' the wrong man."

"Look here," said Doc, suddenly, "you fellows seem to be honest enough, if you are as homely as a government mule, and perhaps you can assist us."

"Well, spit it out, but don't be long, 'cause I smell the bacon a frizzing, and mam'll eat it up on us ef we don't get in putty blame sudden."

"Our two sisters, mine and Kit's, were brought to this house, we believe, two nights ago, by some one, probably Rufe Reynolds. To-day they have gone. Do you know anything about them? Your mother does, but she won't tell us."

"She won't, the old vixen? You just see whether she won't or not," replied Josh, and in an instant he had rushed into the house, while Joe remarked dryly:

"That old woman is spunky as the deuce, but she ain't no match fur Josh. I'll bet she tuck a'vantage o' our being away to hev the gals brought here, but knowin' we'd be hum to-night she's got 'em outer the way. Hello, here comes Josh."

At that moment Josh appeared, holding Mother Vixen by the scruff of the neck, the old hag vituperating wildly, and trying in vain to scratch and bite him.

"Now you jest tell these young fellers who it was what fotched the gals here, when they took 'em away, and where they was gwine, if ye don't want me to twist yer old neck off."

These filial words were uttered by the raw-boned Minnesotan, in whose grasp the old hag, strong though she was, was weaker than a child.

"'Twas Rufe an' Rube what fetched 'em here, confound ye for a pig-headed brat," sputtered the woman.

"Wall, and when did they go away?"

"This noon, and they had a tobaggin, or a sled, whatever you call it."

"Yas, and where was they gwine?"

"Up inter the Chippeway country among the Injuns. The passon he got scared when the gals told him that he daren't marry 'em, and ran away, the old coward."

"An' they've went up into the Injun country for to get married? Speak out, yer old hag! Ye ain't no mother o' our'n when it comes to business like this 'ere."

"You're a chokin' me, ye imp o' the old scratch! Won't I give it to ye when I get the upper hand? Oho, ye yoang wolf, I'll pull yer teeth for ye! Let me go, burn ye, or it'll be the worse for ye."

"Speak out fust, and I will."

"Yes, yes, yes; they did go up toward the Injun country, an' the gals can't help themselves, for Rufe swore he'd get even wi' Kit King for tellin' on him."

"That's all right. Now go in and get our supper. No foolin', mind, or I'll wring yer old neck!"

The giant released the woman, the latter retreating at once, uttering a perfect torrent of abuse, while Joe just stood by and laughed heartily at the singular scene which had just taken place.

"The old woman is putty pesky sometimes," said Josh, "but I kin manage her wefl enough. She's a putty good housekeeper, and we likes to have things ready for us when we come home. She's wicked, I allow, but all she needs is good trainin'. Won't ye come in and have a bite wi' us? The old gal won't be sassy now."

"No, I thank you," said Kit. "The sun has set and we must get back to the ravine. Come, Doc and Ned, do you stick close to me, and let your father go ahead as a guide."

"All right, Kit, for next to bein' with him, I'd rather be with you than anyone. It's fanny, ain't it? This mornin' I was callin' him 'old gentleman' and 'Mr. Hermit,' and now I'm callin' him nothin' but 'pop.'"

"Stranger things have happened, my boy. Now, away with us. Good-night, Josh; good-night, Joe."

"Good-night to you, and good luck in the bargain."

The party was already on the march when this good wish was uttered, and the wind caught up the words and sent them against the distant cliffs which echoed them again and again.

"Good luck—good luck—good—luck—luck—luck!" called the echoes, and Kit could not but regard it as a good omen.

The night air was cold and blustering, the loose snow whirling about their heads and into their faces, but the four pushed on with all haste, as it was necessary to relieve those on guard in the ravine, and start for the Indian country as quickly as possible.

The night had fallen, dark and somber, and they were still fully half a mile from the cave and ravine, when that dreadful sound, which they all knew so well broke upon their ears,

The howling of the wolves!

"Forward!" cried Kit. "The brutes have scented us, and will be on our heels in one minute."

Again comes that dreadful sound, and now it is much nearer than before.

It is taken up, first on one side and then on another, until the whole forest resounds with the fearful cry.

"On, on, my lads!" shouts Kit. "It is a race for life. Keep together, and when they overtake us, fight till the last."

CHAPTER XVIII.

A HATEFUL MARRIAGE PREVENTED.

WHEN Nellie and Susie awoke on the morning after their abduction they were called down into the lower hut by Mother Vixen, who announced that breakfast was ready, and that if they didn't want to go hungry they had better come down at once.

Though the excitement had taken away their appetites, the poor girls managed to make a good meal, for they knew that all their strength would be required to meet the probable dangers before them, and to face the villains who had committed this indignity.

An hour or so afterwards Rufe and Rube came in, bringing a miserable-looking specimen of humanity, with a red nose, watery eyes, sunken cheeks and large ears, who was dressed in a shabby suit of black, shiny from long use, a bedraggled white cravat, and a high hat which had seen its best days long since, and carrying in his dirty hands a soiled and dog-eared prayer-book.

"Here's the passon, and he's goin' to marry us just as soon as ye're ready," said Rufe, introducing this odd specimen to the ladies with a wave of his hand.

"He's reg'lar orthydox 'Piscopalian, Methody, Baptist, or whatever else you please," added Rube; "and he's got his license in his pocket if you want to see it. We ain't goin' to come any fraud on ye, so we've got a reg'lar ordained minister o' the Gospil for to tie the knot and make it all solid and lastin'."

"An' I'm the witness," said a man whom the Reynolds boys had brought with them, Steve French, by the way, "so just say when you're ready, and the dominie kin pitch in."

"The dominie can pitch out, then, as soon as he pleases," cried Susie, with spirit, "for if he waits until we are ready for him, he will have much less hair on his stupid head than he has now."

"And have to use a double pair of glasses in the bargain," added Nellie, for the parson had brought out his spectacles and adjusted them upon his big red nose, making him look more owlshly wise than ever.

"I hope the young ladies do not doubt my authority to perform the marriage rites?" remarked the man, his knees beginning to shake visibly.

"The marriage wrongs, not rights, you mean," said Nellie. "Oh, we know you well enough, Mr. Brown—better than you suppose."

"Don't further disgrace your calling, which you already brought into disrepute as much as you could, sir, by giving your aid to this mockery," said Susie. "Let me tell you that this affair is an insult and an outrage, and if you lend a hand in carrying it out you will be exposed and driven from your parish."

"Which is not particularly large, anyhow," added Nellie. "The people of our village have heard too many unpleasant things about you, Mr. Brown, to tolerate this abuse of your cloth."

Parson Brown's pale face turned very red, and his knees shook so much as to cause his glasses to fall from his nose, and had they not been secured by a cord to his vest buttons, would have dropped upon the floor and been broken.

"The young ladies do not appear to be willing to have the ceremony performed," stammered the poor man, trying to settle his glasses and dropping his book, which he had no more than picked up when he lost his glasses again, the accident rendering him more confused in appearance than ever.

"Indeed they do not appear to be willing, and they are decidedly opposed to it," said Nellie, vehemently.

"And what is more, we have been brought here by force and threatened with everything horrible if we refuse to marry these brutes," said Susie, advancing toward the parson and shouting in his ear, "and we just want you to understand that if you attempt to carry this thing out you will be committing a crime—a crime, do you understand?"

"Bless my soul, I'm not deaf!" cried Mr. Brown, springing back and falling over a pail of water which Mother Vixen had placed near the fire.

The water was overturned, and Mr. Brown received a good wetting, lost his spectacles, flung the book into the fire, soused the cat, set the fire to sputtering, and delaged the floor.

He was a sorry-looking spectacle when he picked himself up and shook the water from him, and Susie laughed heartily at his discomfiture, the gruff and morose Rufe joining in the laugh with a loud guffaw which fairly deafened one.

"Come now, passon, git on with the show durned quick," he said, "for there ain't no time to lose."

"Why, really, Mr. Rufus, I don't know as I ought," faltered the man, glancing first at the three men, then at the girls, and finally at the fire, where his book was fast being consumed. "I haven't my notes for my discourse, and——"

"That's all right; that don't make no difference," said Steve French. "If I'm goin' to witness anythin', I've got to do it putty soon, 'cause I'll be missed down yonder."

"Hurry up, ye old broadcloth villain!" said Rube. "Come, gals, step up and be litched."

"Never!" cried Susie, retreating. "We will die before we submit to this mockery!"

"Ho, ho!" croaked the old woman; "you're nice men to be baffled by a couple o' gals like that. If you had any spunk you'd make 'em do it."

"Silence, woman!" cried Susie, with flashing eyes. "If you have any pity, any goodness left in you, you would not suffer this thing to go on."

"Come here!" cried Rufe seizing Nellie by the arm and dragging her up to the frightened parson, while Rube caught Susie and took his place by the side of his brother.

"Now go ahead and put the question," said Steve, "me and Mother Vixen bein' the witnesses. If you try to get out o' this before the thing is finished I'll put a bullet into yer, so mind that!"

"Really, gentlemen, I don't know as I ought to——"

"Shut up!" bawled Rufe, producing a pistol and pointing it at the man's head. "Go on with the music darnation quick or you'll be a stiff in ten seconds!"

"Don't you dare!" cried Susie.

"You will pay bitterly for this!" was Nellie's angry exclamation, as she tried to release her wrists from Rufe's strong grasp.

"Go ahead!" shouted Rufe, "or I'll pepper you through and through!"

As an earnest reminder of his intentions, in case his will was not complied with, he put a bullet through the top of Parson Brown's hat, which that individual had placed upon his head in an absent-minded fashion after picking himself up from the wet floor.

The poor man trembled like a leaf, and seemed about to fall, but Steve French gave him a shake and stood him on his feet, saying:

"Now drive ahead and don't give us no nonsense, or I'll stand you on your head in the biggest snowdrift I kin find."

"But, gentlemen, I pro——"

"Shut up!" cried all three of the men at once, in a voice of thunder, so that the poor fellow was stunned, and clapped his hands to his ears to keep out the sound.

At the same time Nellie released one of her hands from Rufe's grasp and gave him a stinging blow on the ear, which brought the tears to his eyes.

"Darnation take it all!" he yelled, dancing up and down and letting out a volley of oaths. "My wife what is to be has got a confounded bad temper to begin with. Go on, passon, if you don't want another crack just like the one I got."

"Really, Mr. Rufus, I cannot——"

"Shut up!"

"Do you, then, Mr. Rufus, and you, Mr. Reuben, take these two young ladies, respectively, as your lawful wedded wives, to have and to hold as long as you both shall live?" asked the parson, terrified into compliance.

"We do!" said both the bullies in a breath.

"And do you, young ladies, take these two young men, respectively, to be your lawful wedded husbands, to love, honor and obey, until death does you part, so help you——"

"No!" cried both the girls, and Susie, getting away from Rube,

boxed the parson's ears as soundly as Nellie had boxed Rufe's a moment before.

The poor man, beset on all sides, and foreseeing that he would have a hard time of it whatever he did, made a bolt for his liberty, falling over the cat and striking the door with his head.

It flew open, and he was precipitated out into the snow, his flight being further accelerated by a vigorous kick from French.

The frightened dominie scrambled out of the snow, pulled his hat from off his forehead and eyes, where it had been jammed, and made all haste to his house, some five miles distant.

"Wall, I'll be blowed!" said Rufe. "You're the spunkiest gals I ever see, and I'm bound you shall marry us now, whether you like it or not."

"We will kill you first!" cried Susie, striking the weapon from Rufe's hand and knocking it upon the floor, two chambers being discharged, and narrowly missing giving the villains a bad wound apiece.

"Drat you?" cried Rube, "we'll fix you yet; we'll take you up among the Injuns and make you marry us, whether you want to or not."

"Come along, Rube and Steve!" cried Rufe, "and get a sled. We'll be back ag'in, Mother Vixen, so keep your eye on the gals."

They departed, and the poor girls were relieved for the rest of the day of their hated presence, the men not returning until the next morning.

The two girls tried in vain to persuade Mother Vixen to send for their friends, or at any rate to allow them to escape and run the risk of getting back to the settlement, but the old hag was inexorable, swearing that she dared not do anything until her sons returned, which would probably be on the next day.

Before that time, however, Rufe returned, and putting the girls on a sled drawn by a single horse, started off, first informing Mother Vixen that he was going into the Chippewa country, where he would be certain to enforce an obedience of his wishes.

At this the two unfortunate girls gave up all hope, and resigned themselves to any fate rather than marry their tormentors.

CHAPTER XIX.

A SHARP CONTEST—REINFORCED.

ON through the forest dashed the little party, the wolves in hot pursuit, their cries sounding almost continuously upon the frosty air.

Suddenly Ned, who was behind, tripped over a fallen log and fell upon his face in the snow, uttering a cry of pain.

"Are you hurt, my lad?" asked Kit, pausing to raise him up, and calling to the others to stop.

"Yes, I think I've broken my leg. Anyway, it hurts me to put it down. Ugh! don't go away and leave me, will you?"

"Leave you? No, indeed! Can you walk with my help?"

"I dunno; I'll try."

He did, but the pain was too great, and he fainted in Kit's arms after going a few steps.

"Come here, Kit!" cried Doc suddenly. "There are a lot of logs, and we can make a barricade. Is Ned hurt?"

"Yes, badly. Hurry and give me a lift with him, for I can see the wolves close at hand."

When the old hermit heard that Ned was hurt he ran back and seized him in his arms, carrying him without any trouble to the place of which Doc had spoken.

Ned was placed upon a bed of moss and leaves, from which Doc had scraped away the snow, and then the three men made a hastily constructed barricade, and awaited the advance of the hungry wolves.

Taking aim at a separate pair of glistening eyes, each man fired, and in an instant three howls were heard, and the pack paused for an instant.

Kit and Doc drew their revolvers and sent shot after shot among the wolves, who, not stopping to devour their dead and wounded mates, came hurrying forward, their tongues hanging out of their red mouths and their eyes glowing like coals.

Slapping the cartridges quickly into their breech-loading rifles, the two young men sent the messengers of death whistling into the snarling pack, while the hermit quickly reloaded and followed suit.

Then picking up Ned's little rifle, he made it speak to some purpose, for the wolves stopped within ten feet of the barricade and began barking like so many dogs.

"Give it to them!" cried Kit, reloading his revolvers. "We are at short range now; let 'em have it."

The revolvers belched forth flame and smoke, and one of the gray furies who had leaped upon the topmost log rolled over with a fiendish howl, while Kit followed the shot with others.

Doc suddenly beheld a full dozen of the enraged brutes trying to leap over an angle of the defense, and raising his clubbed rifle he swept about him, crushing in the skulls of one after another of the creatures, Kit and the hermit coming to his aid and forcing the wolves to retreat.

Shot after shot was sent into the pack, which seemed to grow larger every instant, notwithstanding that so many had already been killed.

Ned presently aroused himself and asked what was the matter, and if he was at home yet.

"Not yet, Ned," said Doc, "but I hope you will be soon. The wolves are making it lively for us."

"Oh, won't you let me fight 'em?" he cried, excitedly. "Stick me up in that crotch of a tree and give me my rifle. I would like nothing better than to pepper them."

"We haven't time, Ned," answered Kit, "and besides I don't believe you could stand it."

"Oh, yes, I could. Look out!"

Four or five gaunt wolves were trying to get over the barricade at one side, where it was built against a huge rock, and Ned's caution came just in time.

All three rushed to the place and dashed out the brains of the fierce animals with their clubbed rifles, Kit and Doc then sending in a volley from their revolvers after the main pack, which then retreated to a little distance.

In the short interim which elapsed before the brutes returned to the charge, Ned was placed where he could fire upon the wolves in perfect safety, and his rifle and ammunition passed up to him.

He coaxed so hard that Kit could not refuse, and as Ned declared that his leg did not hurt him near so much, and he did not believe it was broken at all, but only his ankle sprained, he was allowed to have his own way, which pleased him mightily.

The others had reloaded by this time, and as there was no immediate danger of their supplies giving out, they sent in a rattling volley as soon as the wolves began to approach once more.

From his perch in the tree Ned kept up an almost incessant fusillade upon the wolves, which seemed greatly puzzled at the appearance of this new enemy, and snarled and snapped worse than ever.

The space in front of the logs was literally piled up with the dead and mangled bodies of the slaughtered wolves, and the number was being constantly augmented, the hunters knowing that it would be death to leave their shelter now.

Ned proved an invaluable assistant, for from his lofty position he could see whenever the wolves attempted to turn their enemies' flank, and his rifle spoke promptly and quickly every time, thus preventing many a fierce wolf from sneaking around the corner of the barricade, and taking the hunters unawares.

Occasionally he would call out to his friends to look out at this point or that, and in this manner gave timely warning upon several occasions, when without his caution it might have fared badly with the hunters.

Presently, as if by a preconcerted movement, the whole body of wolves dashed past the barricade upon both sides and disappeared in the woods below.

"I don't like that," cried Kit. "They will return in a moment and attack us from behind."

"There are more logs," was Doc's answer. "Let us pen ourselves in, or perhaps it would be better to climb into the trees and pepper at them the way Ned has been doing."

"We shall have to stay here all night anyhow," replied Kit, "and so I don't know but what your plan is a good one."

"Hark!" cried the hermit, "they have attacked some other party. I hear shots."

The reports of firearms were heard at that moment, and by the sound the party attacked by the wolves must have been a large one, for the firing was very heavy and incessant.

"Here they come back!" yelled Ned from his post of observation.

"Go for the trees, or you'll get nabbed."

Hardly had the hunters ensconced themselves among the branches

before the whole pack came swarming back, howling and barking like fiends.

They received a volley and a number fell dead, the survivors pouncing upon them at once and tearing them to pieces.

Kit and his friends discharged another volley at them, and then they heard a ringing shout, and saw a body of men coming up the hill at full speed.

"Hooray!" screamed Ned, "the wolf hunters have come to save us. Bully for our side!"

The wolves were now caught between two fires, and a large number of them fell dead with bullets in their brains.

It seemed that a party of the besiegers had heard the firing, and apprehending that Kit was in some sort of trouble, had followed the sound and gone to their comrades' aid.

They had suddenly met the wolves and driven them back, killing very many of them, but they were undecided as to Kit's fate until they heard Ned's voice and saw the hunters sitting in the trees and pegging away at their natural enemies below.

The latter, finding themselves hemmed in, scattered in all directions, giving a parting howl as they retired, which was answered by a volley of musketry, and several more of the rapacious animals received their death sentences.

"You came just in time, boys," cried Kit, getting down and helping Ned to do the same. "We have had a tough fight of it."

"I should say you had," said Joe Deane, looking at the pile of dead wolves, "if you killed all of those fellows."

"You must take your share of the scalps," said Doc, "for without your help we would have been unable to save anything. The wolves, failing of making a meal of us, would have eaten everyone of these corpses, and not left us a single scalp."

"No, no," said Will Harris, "they belong to you, and you must divide them between you."

"Kit can have my share," said Ned, "'cause I want him to have that silver-mounted rifle."

"Whoever likes may have mine," said the hermit. "I kill the demons, but after that I take no interest in them."

"Then you take it, Doc; but really, I think our friends ought to share the booty with us."

"No, no, we won't," answered George Cook, "so that settles it. We are glad enough to get you out of this scrape. Who is your old friend?"

Kit related briefly how they had met the hermit, and then told how they had not been able to get into the cave, and how but for an accident he would not have known how near his friends were to him.

"Then the siege is up?" asked George.

"Decidedly."

"And Ned has found his father?"

"You bet!" answered the boy for himself.

"Three cheers for Ned!" cried Will Harris, with a laugh, and the cheers were given with a vim that sent the echoes resounding through the forest and brought back the sound of the wolves' cries, now many miles away.

"But the young ladies?" asked Joe Deane.

"We have found out where they are going, and are now in search of them. Will you stand by us?"

"We will!" shouted all hands, leaving no room for doubt as to their determination to follow this matter to the end.

CHAPTER XX.

DONALD ALLEN'S WOLF RANCH CLEANED OUT.

"Where are they?" asked Joe, when the tumult had somewhat subsided.

"Going for the Chippewa country."

"Who told you?"

"Mother Vixen; she said she heard Rufe say as much."

"I'll bet that was a blind."

"A blind?"

"Yes. I will wager that we'll find them a good deal nearer home than that."

"Where?"

"Up at Rufe's. He lives in a wild part of the country, you know, and few people would suspect him of taking the girls there, so near the village."

"And of course if he was missing we would suspect him, whereas if he remained around here one would not be as apt to do so."

"Tell you what," said Harris, "suppose we go up to Don Allen's to-morrow and clean out his wolf ranch. That was only a guy about his giving us an invitation, but we'll pretend we were invited, and clean out the whole thing. It ought to be done."

"I owe him one for trying to push me in the pen, he and the others," said Kit, "and it will serve him just right to kill off every wolf he has got."

"Let's scalp these fellows and then go home," said George Cook. "Come, boys, let us pitch in and make a good job of it."

They all set to work, and as there were so many the job did not take long, though there were nearly a hundred dead wolves, so fierce had been the slaughter.

The scalps were divided equally between Doc and Kit, and then the young men set out for Kit's home, Ned being carried by them, as his ankle still pained him, the hermit returning to his cave.

The boy had not broken his leg, but only given his ankle a bad turn, a little proper attention being all it needed to make it well again in a short time.

Kit's mother attended to the lad, for she was fond of him because Kit was, and shortly afterwards the boy was sound asleep, Kit remaining up to tell his mother what had happened during his absence.

The next day, before sunrise, Kit and Doc were on their way to the settlement to meet their friends and go on a grand wolf hunt in Don Allen's ranch; and had the old reprobate known of it, he would undoubtedly have prepared a warm reception for them.

He did not, however, and was therefore totally unprepared for any such demonstration as was shortly to take place.

Ned begged to be allowed to go along, but he was really not well enough to stand the fatigue, and so remained behind, though it was a great disappointment to him, and he made Kit promise to tell him all about the affair on his return.

At the Springs they met a large party of their friends, and upon the outskirts of the settlement as many more, so that by the time they reached the ranch there were fully seventy-five souls, all well armed, in the party.

There seemed to be no one stirring, and, dividing the party into two sections—one commanded by Kit, Doc and Harris, and the other by Deane, Cook, and one of their friends—the ranch was surrounded, and at a given signal the stockade was mounted and the firing began.

The wolves were quickly dislodged from their place of retreat and huddled together in the center of the inclosure, where a rapid fire was directed upon them, the hunters picking off the voracious monsters one by one in a rapid manner.

Then they began running up and down wildly, endeavoring to escape and seeking all the secluded corners, where they would be the least exposed to the galling fire of their enemies.

The whole thing had been arranged so carefully and systematically that, although Donald Allen was aroused in about three minutes, and came running out to see what it all meant, the slaughter was already very great.

"What in time does all this mean?" he demanded, as he came running from his house, Bart Reynolds appearing a minute later.

"We have accepted your invitation to clean out the ranch," answered Doc, picking off a gaunt wolf who had ventured too near the stockade.

"Whose invite?"

"Yours," was the reply of Will Harris, as he sent another of the monsters to his death.

"I never gave ye no invite."

"We understood you did, and it was Rufe who told us so," said Kit, following up the fire of his comrades, which was echoed by a ringing volley from the other side of the stockade.

The gaunt wolf keeper danced around like a hornet and fairly made the air blue with his oaths as he realized what terrible slaughter must be going on.

"Come down off that fence," he shouted, drawing a pistol from his belt and pointing it at Doc.

"I guess not," was the cool retort, as the young man picked off a cub which had just run out of one of the pens to see what the trouble was all about.

"Consarn my eyes; we'll see whether you won't," roared the man, with an oath, as he fired point-blank at Doc.

As he pulled the trigger Will Harris struck him in the arm and caused him to drop his weapon with an oath, but the bullet hit Doc in the shoulder and caused him to fall from his position, landing inside the stockade.

He was in great peril, for the wolves, thoroughly maddened and excited, were rushing hither and thither, snapping and snarling, and wrought to such a pitch of frenzy that it was almost sure death to fall among them.

"To the rescue!" shouted Kit, leaping into the inclosure, followed by Harris, Cook, Deane and a dozen others.

Meanwhile Donald had been reinforced by Bart Reynolds and the latter's wife and daughter, perfect amazons, who could handle a rifle as well as a man, and were as strong as lions.

"Give it to the cusses!" yelled Becky, she who sought to win the affections of Kit, as she brandished a brace of pistols and made a spring for the top of the stockade, which she reached as nimbly as a cat would do it.

"Go for 'em!" cried Bart. "Dod rot the durned thieves! I'll stand by yer, Don, hang me if I don't!"

"You keep quiet," ordered one of the wolf hunters, Charlie Mertz by name, a young German, who was as plucky as men are usually made.

"Won't do it," snarled Bart.

"Take that, then," and young Mertz struck Bart a stinging blow across the mouth, which sent him sprawling out upon the snow, and caused his pistols to fly from his hands to a distance of about ten feet.

Becky saw the act, having chanced to look around at that instant, and with a yell of rage she sent a bullet whistling close to Charlie Mertz's head, which made him jump back more suddenly than gracefully, and, tripping upon the ice, he fell directly across Bart, driving all the breath out of his body.

Meanwhile Doc had risen, and he and his friends had made a rush to the center of the inclosure, where they stood in a solid mass, back to back, facing the howling wolves, and dealing out death in the face of awful odds.

Becky attempted to fire a shot at Doc, whom she hated, when Charlie Mertz, releasing Bart from the weight of his body, ran up and pulled Becky's foot, the girl being seated astride of the fence in the most approved masculine fashion.

The bullet went wide of its mark and struck a wolf, while Miss Becky tumbled off the fence into a snowdrift just outside, in the most undignified manner, Charlie Mertz making a break for the little cabin from which one entered the wolf pen.

He was followed by a dozen men, and Donald, attempting to dispute their way, was thrown down and walked over by the careless hunters, who were intent on aiding their comrades in their desperate strait.

They rushed into the hut, headed by Mertz, who threw open the gates and dashed right into the midst of the wolves with a ringing shout.

"Don't give up, Kit," he shouted; "don't give up! Here comes Germany to your help!"

"And, begorra, Oireland is not far behind!" roared Pat Herlihy, a stalwart representative of the Emerald Isle, as he dashed the brains out of a much too ferocious wolf who was attempting to dispute his path.

Then all hands jumped down into the pen, where the greatest fighting was now taking place, and the contest turned in favor of the wolf hunters, who slaughtered everything wolfish that came in their way, from a cub of a few weeks to the fully-grown mountain devil in the guise of a wolf.

The snow was covered with blood and brains, dead and dying wolves, hair, bones, discarded garments, broken rifles and blood-stained knives, the fight having been conducted with the utmost fury, and every convenient weapon brought into play.

The stockade was broken through in many places, the wolves vainly endeavoring to retreat to the woods outside.

At last there was not a single wolf left alive of all the number that had been imprisoned, and yet scarcely an hour had passed from the time the first shot was fired until the last scalp was taken and hung at the belt of some daring hunter.

Then the party sallied forth, headed by Kit, Donald Allen, Bart Reynolds, Steve French, Dan Brown and half a dozen other kindred spirits, meeting them outside.

"What in thunder do you expect to pay me fur this fun?" demanded Donald, in a rage.

"Nothing," answered Kit. "Rube and Rufe Reynolds and Steve French there, told us that you had asked us all up to the ranch to kill the wolves; didn't they, boys?"

"They did!" came the answer in a perfect tumult of sound.

"Then it's a durned lie, for I never said nothing like it. I'd be a fool if I did. Gol darn ye, Bart, I'm going to take this out o' you, and you kin hand it over to Rufe when you see him."

Thereupon the enraged Donald fell upon Bart, tooth and nail, and gave him a most deserved pummeling before Becky and the "old woman" could interfere.

They quickly came to the rescue of the husband and father, however, and then Steve French, Dan Brown and the others joined in, taking sides with one or the other of the principal combatants, until a regular scrimmage was going on.

"When rogues fall out, honest men get their dues," said Charlie Mertz, with a laugh. "Come ahead, Kit, we have nothing to do with this."

"To the house of Rufe!" commanded Kit. "Come, boys, there we may find those whom we seek. Forward!"

CHAPTER XXI.

A BRAVE DEED.

It did not take long to reach the dwelling of the Reynolds family, and Kit was about to rap upon the door when it was opened and Rufe himself appeared.

"You villain!" cried Kit, "what have you done with my sister?"

"Ain't done nothin' with her; ain't seen her."

"You lie!"

"Look 'ere, Kit King, that 'ere is a fightin' word, an' I ain't goin' ter stand it."

"And you'll find me a fighting man if you don't tell me where my sister is."

"Dunno where she is, I tell yer. I ain't seen her."

"You didn't take her to Mother Vixen's house?"

"No, I didn't; and if anybody did it was them two cusses, Joe and Josh. Yer can't trust 'em any more'n you kin a wolf."

"You know you are lying," said Doc, coming up at that instant; "and if you don't tell us this moment where the girls are you will have a nice coat of tar and feathers to keep you warm."

"Tar and feather the cuss!" shouted all the others.

"Make a canary birrad about o' the gawk," said Mulvichel. "Begorra, he wud make a fine wan."

"Ye'd better jest try it," said Rufe, brandishing his rifle. "Hold on now, you fellows. I've got suthin' to say."

"Say it quick, then," replied Kit, "for we haven't any time to waste on you."

"I'm willin' to do the squar' thing by you, 'cause I don't know nothin' about the gals."

"You took 'em to the hermit's cave," said Mertz.

"You're a durned old horse-thief, for I didn't. The gals I tuck to ther cave was Beck and a friend of hern. Wasn't they, Beck?"

"Of course yer did, and if these yer fellows don't clear out I'll pour bilin' water on 'em."

"Howsomdever, you're welcome to look over the house," said Rufe, "and I won't hinder ye. If I had 'em, it ain't likely that I'd let ye do that, is it? Search as much as ye like, and if ye find 'em, ye kin have 'em."

Rufe then went into the house, leaving the door open, Kit, Doc, George Cook, Charlie Mertz and Joe Deane following, the others keeping a guard upon the outside.

The house was not a very large one, and the search, in consequence, did not take very long, a few minutes sufficing to go all over the place, top and bottom.

"Where is Rufe?" asked Kit.

"Down cellar," answered Becky. "He thought ye might like some cider ter drink."

"Did he, indeed?" replied Doc. "I guess we'll go down after him. He's not a man to be trusted. No one knows what underground passage he may have dug in order to escape when hard pushed."

"Sho! ye don't believe that, do yer?"

"Indeed, we do," said Joe Deane. "Come ahead, boys."

"Yew ain't goin' daown that cellar, so jest make up yer mind ter that."

"We will see whether we are or not," said George Cook, and catching the Amazon by the arm, he suddenly pulled her away from the door, the others descending in a twinkling.

The infuriated Becky scratched and bit and spluttered, but George, having no eye for her charms, thrust her out of the door into a snow bank, where she had a chance to cool her temper.

She quickly got up, and turning a frightened look toward the house, gathered her shawl about her head and scampered off, muttering to herself:

"They think they're smart, but I just wanted 'em to go down that cellar. Wish I'd had a chance ter lock ther door on 'em."

She turned her head again, and then ran faster than ever, chuckling to herself as if greatly amused at something.

"He, he, they won't think it so funny when they git blowed up, will they?" she said. "Serve 'em right, too."

Meanwhile, Kit, Doc and the rest had reached the cellar, but saw no signs of Rufe nor of cider barrels, though a number of kegs stood over in one corner.

"Light a torch," said Kit.

"Here's a light over in this corner," said Doc.

"My God! run for your lives," shouted Charlie Mertz at the same instant.

"What do you mean?"

"The villain has left a lighted fuse under one of these kegs of gunpowder!"

"Gunpowder?"

"Yes, there are a dozen of them!"

"The villain!"

"Get out of here as fast as you can!"

"Put out the fuse."

"It's too late; I can't reach it. It will burn to the end in just one minute."

"Then I will!" shouted Kit.

Joe and Doc made a rush for the stairs, falling over each other in their haste, while Kit thrust his arm between two kegs where Charlie had shown him the sputtering fuse.

At the same moment Charlie called out:

"There is a passage leading out of here, but the door is securely barred; the villain has escaped."

"Save yourself, Charlie," cried Kit. "My arm is too big; I can't reach it. Oh, if Ned Rowell was here."

"My God! Give me a chance, Kit. Stand aside, quick, for Heaven's sake, and I will try again."

He had torn off his coat, split his shirt sleeve from top to bottom, and as Kit stepped aside threw himself flat upon his face and thrust his naked arm between the kegs.

There was no chance to pull them out, as they were heavily weighted with stuff of all sorts, and it was only by the merest chance that their presence had been discovered at all.

Had Rufe taken a little more pains to conceal his fuse, the thing would never have been found out, and the whole party would have been blown to pieces before they knew what was the matter.

Charlie was smaller than Kit, and his arm, stripped of its coverings, was slight and thin, thus giving him an advantage in the present desperate case, which Kit did not possess.

He thrust his fingers as far into the hole as he could, and closed them upon something which burned him to the bone.

The pain was excruciating, but that was nothing so long as he could save the lives of his friends.

He drew out his arm and threw the extinguished fuse upon the floor, then peering through the space between the kegs, and muttering:

"There is not the least sign of a spark left. We are safe, thank God!"

Then he fell, completely exhausted, the excitement having passed, leaving him as weak as a child.

Kit caught him in his arms and bore him quickly upstairs and into the open air.

"Search everywhere, boys," he cried. "Rufe has escaped, and you may thank Charlie Mertz that you haven't all been blown to atoms."

"Even now there may be danger," cried Doc. "Scatter, boys, scatter."

They did scatter in all directions, Kit following their example by

bearing Charlie to a safe distance, although he did not apprehend any further danger.

There must have been a single spark remaining, however, and this, fanned into life by the current which swept in, the doors having all been left open, did the work which Charlie Mertz had so nobly prevented, and thus saved a number of lives.

Kit had hardly reached a place of safety when there came a puff of white smoke, in the midst of which was a blinding sheet of flame, and a few seconds later a deafening report was heard which seemed to echo and re-echo from all the hills for miles around.

At the sound, Charlie Mertz opened his eyes and said:

"Was I, then, too late?"

"No," said Kit. "You have saved our lives, old fellow, and all that Rufe Reynolds has to show for his villainy are the ruins of his own house."

CHAPTER XXII.

UPON THE TRAIL.

WHEN the smoke cleared away, nothing but the smoldering ruins of the house were to be seen, and these the breeze fanned into flames very quickly.

They roared and snapped, but there was no other house near which could catch fire from it, and so the blaze was permitted to burn itself out, the wolf hunters looking on and making an occasional remark.

"Becky tried to shut and bolt the door after you had gone down," said George Cook, "and if I had not remained above she would no doubt have done so, cutting off our escape thereby."

"There is the supposed underground passage," said Kit. "Charlie discovered the door to it, and I don't doubt that we can get in now."

"Wait till the flames have gone down some, before we enter the place," said Doc. "The danger has not passed yet."

"The presence of Rufe in this place indicates that he could not have gone to the Chippewa country, for he could not go there and back in so short a time," remarked Kit.

"Rufe and some one else may have gone, though," said Will Harris. "We must at any rate discover the rest of these scoundrels, and make them tell where the young ladies are."

"Let us go into the ruin," suggested Kit, when the flames seemed to have died out. "Most likely that door that Charlie saw is burned away by this time, and we shall have no trouble in getting in."

They made their way over piles of smoldering rubbish to the cellar, and after a short search the door was found, badly burned and warped.

It was the work of a few minutes only to break it down, and then the young man saw a narrow passage dug into the bank, just high enough to permit one's passing without stooping.

It was as dark as a pit, and our hero got a torch and led the way, followed by half a dozen of his best friends, each with a torch, the combined illumination of which gave them all the light they wanted.

Kit advanced rapidly, and presently the path widened and branched off in two different directions.

Kit, Charlie Mertz and Joe Deane struck along one of these paths, while Doc, Will Harris, and Cook went the other, the agreement being that whichever party found itself in a blind alley should return and join the others.

After proceeding for three or four hundred feet, Kit suddenly felt the cold air blowing upon him, and rushing forward, he came in a few moments to the end of the passage.

It ceased in a small ravine, and footprints could be seen leading from it up the sides of the hollow, and in all probability they had only recently been made.

"See here," said Kit, "a woman has been carried through this passage. Do you see these threads upon the snow? They have been torn from her dress as she passed."

"And here are the imprints of two gloved hands on the ice at the mouth of this passage," said Charlie. "The fur has adhered, and you can see the very form of the hands made by the heat they gave out."

"The villain has borne away one of the girls this very morning," said Kit, excitedly, "and beyond a doubt it was when he went into the cellar."

Quickly ascending to the woods above, Kit led his party along upon the trail which seemed to lead toward a hillside where the wolves

generally congregated the most at night, there being no houses within several miles except those of the Reynoldses and Don Allen.

Doc and his party pursued their way along the other path, and at the end of ten minutes came out upon a stream which flowed into the river a few miles below.

The ice was covered with a light coating of snow, and on this could be seen the tracks of several men, the runners of a sled, and in a few places the small footprints which indicated that a woman was of the party.

"What is this?" said Doc, picking up something from a snowdrift into which it had fallen.

The object proved to be a powder-horn, upon the bottom of which was burned, evidently with a red-hot cinder, the two initials "R. R."

"That might belong to either Rube or Rufe," said Doc; "but at any rate, it is the property of one of them, and we are on the track."

"That story of their going to the Indian country was probably a blind," said Will Harris, "in order to throw us off the scent and give them time to carry out their base plans."

"They will not succeed," added George, "for though they are ahead of us somewhat, we will catch up with them before long."

The little party followed the trail along the frozen stream, and just before they reached the river they found a fur mitten, which Doc said belonged to his sister Susie.

"This horn does belong to Rube, and he has probably taken Susie by one road, while Rufe has carried Nellie along the other. They will no doubt meet at some point down the river. Let us make haste, for we may yet be too late."

When they had reached the river they looked for the trail again, and were engaged in hunting for it when Mark Carrington suddenly appeared in sight, skating towards them.

"Hallo, boys," he said, when he came up. "What are you looking for?"

Doc told him, and Mark exclaimed:

"Then I can help you, for I saw Rube and two or three men go by in a sled an hour ago, and there seemed to be a young woman with them."

"I did not think it could be Becky, and so it must have been Susie. I think that both Bart Reynolds and Don Allen were with Rube, but they were going so fast that I couldn't tell very well."

"Which way did they go?"

"Toward Dan Brown's woods. I saw Dan himself just before, and he seemed to be chuckling over something."

"He's a nice man to be the brother of a minister," said Will Harris.

"And that makes me think," continued Mark, "I just met the parson, and he said that those two villains carried him up to Mother Vixen's and tried to make him marry the two girls to them."

"They would never consent in the world!" cried Doc, hotly. "They refused, did they not? But, yes—I know they did."

"He said they frightened him pretty badly, but he managed to make his escape before the thing had been done. The young ladies both refused indignantly, but he said he was afraid of his life, and that they might compel the poor girls to yield."

"They would die first!"

"I never did think much of Brown, parson though he is. Before I came here I knew him, and he was obliged to leave the East on account of some ugly stories about him. He was pretty well frightened, though, and if he hadn't been, would have tried to settle this affair up in some way."

"The sniveling old fool," said Doc. "I'll shake him out of his boots if I catch him. The idea of his daring to marry Nellie to that ugly Rufe Reynolds."

"There's one thing, anyhow," said Harris; "we know now that these ruffians were lying when they said they knew nothing about the abduction. You know that they accused the Indians when we first told them about it."

"I did not think they had had a hand in it at first," said Cook; "but I can see now that that story of their being at home all the previous night, and coming down to tell us about Donald Allen's offer was all a blind."

"You've been up to Don's and cleared away the wolves," said Mark, "anyhow, whether Don meant to have you or not. He is pretty mad over it."

"I should say he was. Will you go with us to Dan Brown's woods?"

"Yes, to be sure I will, Doc. I haven't forgotten the favors you and Kit have done me. I stopped to see Ned, and he is much better. He says he is going to induce his father to give up the life of a hermit."

"I hope he will. Here we are, across the river, and now let us strike for the woods at once."

While talking they had crossed the river, and now, putting on their snowshoes, they set off at a lively pace, one after the other, in Indian file, as the path was too narrow to admit of their going abreast.

An hour later they reached the edge of the tract which belonged to Brown, and here they paused to rest, as the way was now more difficult, and they did not altogether know in which direction to proceed.

The wolves abounded here, also, in great numbers, and it was necessary to exercise great caution for fear they might suddenly come upon a pack of the savage creatures and be obliged to fight for their lives.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE FATE OF RUBE REYNOLDS.

WHILE the hunters were sitting upon fallen logs, resting themselves preparatory to continuing their search, a crackling noise was heard in the bushes, and Doc whispered cautiously:

"Drop down on the snow, boys, and if this is some of those scoundrels, let 'em have it, just to show 'em we are in earnest."

The noise increased, and in a moment two huge men came in sight, long snowshoes upon their feet and heavy double-barreled guns over their shoulders.

"It is Joe and Josh," said Doc. "They're all right."

Then he and his friends arose and walked towards the two giants, Doc saying:

"So we meet again. Where are you going—hunting?"

"Well, yes," said Josh, "but it ain't wolves we're huntin', but skunks—two-legged skunks at that."

"Then I'll bet that we are on the same errand. You are looking for Rube and Rufe?"

"We are, just; and if we catch 'em let 'em look out for themselves. I ain't goin' to have the hull town down on us 'cause they wanted to marry two gals against their will."

"They needn't have taken our house for to do their wicked work in," said the other brother, "and we'll just show 'em what we think. I ain't got nothin' against Kit, neither has Josh, and Rufe has got ter pay for bringin' blame onto us."

"And that old woman up there, she'd ought to knowed better, but she thought she'd make some money, confound her."

"If she hadn't been a woman, I'd ha' licked her, and as it wur, we jist made her understand we wasn't goin' to have no nonsense, and the next thing to do is to lick them two Reynoldses."

"Do you know where to find them?" asked George.

"Yas, and that's up here in Dan Brown's woods. They is a hut where they hangs out sometimes, and I guess we'll find 'em thar. I'll show ye the road."

They set out again, Josh leading the way, muttering vague threats to himself, and before long they struck as wild a spot as any in the whole region.

The trees grew so thick and towered to such a height that a perpetual twilight reigned even in the brightest days; huge masses of rock were piled one upon another, in the crevices of which the wolves had their dens; gnarled and blasted trees sprang right out from among the ledges, and the underbrush was so thick as to make walking very difficult.

In this desolate spot a pack of wolves might spring out at any moment, and their tracks could be plainly seen in the snow, their fierce cries being heard every now and then at a distance.

They did not remain at a distance, however, for it was not long before they could be seen sneaking through the trees and watching the party with hungry eyes.

The hunters did not want to fire upon them for fear of alarming the Reynolds boys, Dan Brown's lone hut being not far away, as Josh informed them.

They began to approach so near, however, and to grow so fearless, that at last the hunters fired a volley upon them and dispatched at least half a dozen, charging upon the rest and putting them to flight.

Had it been night the task would have been much more difficult, if possible at all, but in the daytime the monsters were more cowardly.

The shots had been the occasion of alarming some one, for at the end of a few minutes Josh led the party in sight of the hut, whence the figure of a man was seen making his way in hot haste toward the deeper woods.

Josh threw his gun to his shoulder and fired, a yell of pain telling him that he had hit his mark, though whether the shot had been fatal or not remained to be told.

"There, Mr. Rube, how do you like that?" said the giant. "Hallo, there's more firin'."

To be sure, the quick, sharp report of firearms at some little distance was now heard, mingled with the yelping of wolves.

"Some one else is having a tussle with the wolves, I fancy," said Doc.

"Might it not be Kit and his party?" asked George. "It is more than likely that Rufe came up this way, and that Kit, in following the trail, has met a pack of wolves."

"But I say, what is that?" cried Harris. "Rufe is attacked by wolves!"

Josh and Joe had darted ahead, and now Mark rushed after them, calling out to Doc and his party:

"Go inside and see who is there. We must look after these fellows."

When he caught up with the two brothers, he found them once more engaged in fighting the wolves, the snarling animals being in the midst of a struggle between themselves over something which had fallen to the ground, and over which they were wrangling.

A few well directed shots from the three men sent them howling back into the woods, and it was seen what they had been fighting over.

Upon the snow lay the body of a man nearly eaten by the voracious monsters, there being just enough of his face left to identify him, his clothes being rent into a thousand fragments.

The unfortunate man who had thus fallen a prey to the ferocity of the wolves was Rube Reynolds.

"I had a grudge agin him," said Josh, "but I never wanted anything so bad as this to happen."

"How did it come about?" asked Mark.

"When I plugged him I struck him in the shoulder, but that didn't fetch him down. He was gettin' away as fast as he could, when he slipped on that there slippery rock and fell on his back, and the next minute the wolves ran out and grabbed him."

"Who can say that he has not met a just fate!" said Mark. "He lived a bad life, and vengeance has overtaken him at last. A higher power than ours has brought him to his last account."

At this moment there was a shout from Doc and Will Harris, and fearing that they may have met Rufe and got into a fight with him, Mark hurried back to the hut, followed by the two brothers, leaving the mangled remains behind.

Mark forgot them, and the two others did not care, the result being that when next Mark Carrington went to the place, the bones of Rube Reynolds were scattered far and wide, and nothing remained as a memento of him but his gun and hunting knife.

When the three reached the hut they found Doc with Susie in his arms, while the form of Steve French was seen just disappearing in the woods.

"Nellie is not here," said Doc, "and Susie says that Rufe has taken her somewhere, but she does not know where. I hope Kit will come up with him."

"Where are the others?"

"Don Allen has got the start of Steve French, and Bart has not been seen lately, though Sue says he came here with the others."

"Hark!" said Mark. "Some one is coming."

They all grasped their weapons firmly, so as to be prepared for the worst, when the bushes were parted, and Kit appeared, followed by his friends.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A DESPERATE CHANCE.

"HAVE you found them?" asked Kit, as soon as he came up.

"We have found Susie, but not Nellie," said Doc, "and Rufe is dead."

"Who killed him?"

"The wolves."

"It was a frightful death, but who can say that his punishment was not merited?"

"No one, for we all know it was."

"What are we going to do? We daren't stay here in the woods, and I hate to abandon the trail."

"So do I, but I think we had better return to the settlement."

"Suppose you and I follow these fellows, and let Mark carry Susie back with him?"

"That will do well enough."

"Then suppose we do it?"

The party then separated, Mark and the others, with the exception of the two giants, Josh and Joe, returning to the village, while Kit and Doc pushed still further into the forest.

At the end of an hour's walk they came most unexpectedly upon a trail, the sight of which inspired them with fresh vigor.

There were two tracks, one large and deeply made, like that of a man, and the other small and delicate, as if a woman had been hurried over the frozen snow.

There were drops of blood marking the man's footprints, and without doubt he had been wounded and made his way with difficulty.

The further they went the thicker grew the drops of blood, until at last there was a continuous red stretch, like a ribbon, upon the snow.

Then they came to a place where the man had evidently sat down to bind up his wound, several bits of white cloth, saturated with blood, being found on the trail.

After that the blood ceased to show again for some time; but then it began to dot the snow here and there, the spots getting thicker and thicker once more, and being evidently comparatively freshly made.

"Who can this scoundrel be?" said Kit. "Is it Rufe? We missed him down below, and, hearing you fellows fire, came up. We peppered one or two wolves before that, and——"

"Wolves! My God, I had forgotten them!"

"Why should you think of them now any more than before?"

"Do you see this trail of blood? They will smell it and follow it as surely as a shark follows a plague ship. We shall, by and by, have them on our track."

"Hark!"

Gr-rugh!

"By Heaven! they have already scented it! Forward, or we are lost!"

"Worse than that; Nellie herself will be devoured by the terrible creatures if they once come up. It is she, no doubt, whom this wretch is carrying off."

Ragh, rah! Gr-a-ah!

"Haste, haste, for Heaven's sake! Ah! look yonder on the crest of that small rise! What is it?"

"A man."

"Yes, and he has a woman with him. Thank Heaven! we have come up with him in time!"

Again the cries of the wolves are heard, this time with greater volume, and at a lesser distance than before.

They rush forward with all speed, shouting lustily to the man ahead of them to seek some shelter ere it is too late.

He hears them, springs up, and, catching the form of the woman in his arms, rushes away into the woods.

Kit is afraid to shoot, for fear of hitting the girl, whom he is sure must be Nellie, though she has uttered no cry, nor has he got near enough to identify her.

Suddenly, however, they see the man totter and fall to the ground, the young girl falling upon the snow beside him.

She arises and seems to be making some frantic efforts, and presently she throws up her arms, snatches something from her face and shouts:

"Kit, dear Kit! help me, for the love of Heaven!"

"It is Nellie!" cries Doc. "The scoundrel's wound has been too much for him. He will be in our power in a few moments."

"Perhaps beyond it," answered Kit, but Doc was too excited to hear or heed the words, and he bounded forward with the speed of a deer, the cries of the wolves sounding most alarmingly nearer.

In a few minutes they came to where the man still lay upon the

ground, and Nellie threw herself into Doc's arms, her lover, of course, being entitled to the first embrace.

Kit stooped beside the form upon the snow and found it was that of Donald Allen, the former keeper of the wolf ranch, now nearly lifeless.

He had been wounded in the side, and the blood had trickled down his leg and dropped from his foot to the snow, making the red track they had seen.

He had bound up his wound, but the constant motion had caused the wound to bleed afresh, and worse than before.

He had fastened his leather belt about him so tightly that he had ruptured a blood vessel as he ran with Nellie in his arms, and it was that which had caused him to fall so suddenly.

He had received his wound in a quarrel with Bart Reynolds, whom he had killed, and then he had followed Rufe, his wound causing him great pain, and had knocked the villain down, taken the young lady away from him, and set out upon a fresh trail.

There was a small hut directly ahead of them, at a distance of about a quarter of a mile now, and to this he had been taking his way when overcome by the hand of death.

As he finished his story the howls of the wolves could be heard nearer than ever, and Kit sprang up, crying:

"Straight ahead, Doc, straight ahead! There is a shelter beyond!"

"For God's sake don't leave me to be devoured by wolves!" shrieked Allen, springing up.

The effort was too much for him, and he fell upon the snow, the blood gushing from his mouth in a perfect flood.

Doc had caught Nellie in his arms, and was already several yards in advance of Kit, who stopped for an instant to look at the form before him and to satisfy himself that life was extinct.

"Heaven help me!" he groaned. "I cannot bear to leave his dead body to be torn to pieces by these voracious monsters; but if I try to bear it to the hut I shall lose my own life."

As he spoke even three wolves, more daring than the rest, rushed from behind trees and made a savage dash at him.

Crack!

Crack!

Gr-rr-ah!

His trusty weapons belched forth a terrible warning, and two of the wolves fell dead at his very feet.

Crack!

The third one bounded into the air with a yelp and a howl and fell dead, pierced to the heart by a bullet from Kit's unerring rifle.

Whipping out his keen knife, their bloody scalps were dangling at his belt in as many seconds, and then slapping a cartridge into his rifle, he bounded on after his friend, the wolves following close behind.

Once he turned and sent a volley into the howling pack, killing two more, which gave him a respite for a brief season.

With long, swinging strides he dashed on, and soon saw the hut ahead of him and Doc running out to come to his assistance, having put Nellie in a safe place inside.

There were wolves on all sides of him, and some of them dangerously near, but Doc's rifle now spoke, and at every report came an answering death yelp, and another wolf gave up his life.

It was a close fight, for the wolves had attempted to turn their flank, and quite a number had got between them and the hut and were howling like fiends, as if in triumph.

Crack!

Crack!

Crack!

"Let 'em have it, Doc!" shouts Kit, "and keep moving! We'll be there in a moment!"

Crack!

"There's another one down!" yells Doc. "Now, then, now's our time!"

They dash ahead, but the hut is still several paces away, and at that instant a scream from Nellie tells them that the wolves have entered the cabin.

With the speed of the wind, urged on by love and despair united, the two young men reach the hut and strike down an enormous wolf at the very instant that he is about to fasten his teeth upon the unfortunate girl's fair throat.

CHAPTER XXV.

BESIEGED BY WOLVES.

Kit seized the wolf by the hind legs, tore off its scalp, and threw the body outside just as the rest of the pack came swarming up.

They stopped to fight over the carcass, and Doc closed the door and rolled a heavy log against it, just as the fierce animals dashed upon it with a force that nearly broke it from its rude hinges.

"We are safe for the present," said Doc, "but we cannot tell—Hullo! Look out, Kit! The window!"

The one window which the hut contained had been left open, and as Doc spoke a lean and hungry wolf, with eyes aflame, had leaped up and was trying to force an entrance.

Kit brained him on the instant, and his limp and lifeless body fell outside to be devoured by his fellows, while Kit slammed to the heavy shutter which admitted light into the hut and threw the bar into its place, thus effectually barring out the wolves in that quarter, at least.

"It's dark in here now," remarked Doc. "Can't you light a fire some way or another?"

"I suppose so. Wait until I strike a light."

Kit quickly produced a light from his tinder-box and found a pile of charcoal in the fireplace, the remains of some former fire.

This he lit and blew into a glowing heat, after which he threw on some light brush which lay in one corner of the hut, and, when this had caught into a good, hot blaze, laid one or two sticks on top, waiting until they should burn before putting on anything heavier.

"Donald must have intended staying here, for there is quite a little fuel all ready to hand."

"Enough to last all night?"

"No; why?"

"Because, in all likelihood, we shall have to stay that long."

"And it is growing decidedly colder."

"Decidedly. Do you hear the wind whistle?"

Kit nodded and put a big log carefully upon the fire, placing it well back, barking it up with hot coals, and then laying an armful of shorter ones in front of it.

The wood ignited readily, and a genial warmth was soon given out, which was very pleasant after the severe cold of the forest.

"Is there no bar for the door?" asked Doc, suddenly, bracing his back up against the rough boards, which the snarling wolves threatened to break down every instant.

"Not that I can see."

"We must have one."

"I will look—it may be stowed away somewhere."

A thorough search revealed nothing in the shape of a bar sufficient, ly long enough to secure the door, and poor Nellie was in despair at the thought of its being forced open by the hungry demons outside.

"Here's my rifle, Doc," said Kit. "Put that into the sockets; it will hold as long as the door will."

Doc used the weapon as a bar, the wolves snarling and barking outside and trying vainly to get in.

Suddenly a cry from Nellie attracted Kit's attention, and he saw her catch up a brand from the fire and strike at something over by the window, down close to the floor, a howl of rage following the motion.

"One of those horrible wretches was trying to force himself in between two of the logs," said the brave girl, "and I just gave him a whack across the nose with that torch."

"By George, there are several more of those horrid wretches trying to do the same thing," said Doc, kicking savagely at a pair of glistening eyes that showed themselves at a crack under the door.

Kit seized his revolver and blazed away at several more of the gray demons who were trying to enforce an entrance under the logs, the hut being old and dilapidated, and the agonized yelps that greeted him showed that the bullets had struck true to the mark.

The wind could be heard sighing and moaning outside, and by its sound the night was probably bitter cold, though within all was warm and bright.

Anon it increased in violence, and now it did not sigh, it shrieked and howled, and mingling with the barking, snarling and yelping of the voracious monsters outside, was calculated to produce anything but a cheering effect upon the minds of the three who were imprisoned in the hut.

Nellie sat upon a large, flat stone by the fireside, while Kit and Doc

kept up the warfare, attacking the wolves whenever they came too dangerously near, and sending more than one where they could no longer trouble mankind.

"There are more of these devils outside," said Kit, after a long pause. "They have been attracted hither from all the country around. As well as I can see through the cracks, there must be hundreds of them."

"If they should make a grand rush upon the hut they would demolish it. Hal! what was that?"

"Something on the roof. There! I can see his ugly snout pushing through the thatch."

Crack!

The wolf dropped dead, but others had followed him, and their eyes could be seen glistening through many holes in the miserable roof, and now and again their red jaws and gleaming teeth were easily distinguished.

Crack!

Crack!

Crack!

The situation was growing desperate, and it behooved the young wolf hunters to make every shot tell with deadly effect.

Suddenly Doc uttered a startling cry, which showed how much more serious their situation had grown even in a few moments.

"We have set the roof on fire!"

"And the wind will soon fan it into a fierce blaze!"

"What shall we do? We cannot put it out."

"No; but it may help us."

"How?"

"Wolves are afraid of fire."

"Then they will have a dose—for look! It is spreading, and will soon blaze up brightly."

His words were true, for in a very few minutes the roof was all ablaze, the red tongues of flame licking up the dry timbers despite the snow piled upon them, and the smoke curling up in great clouds.

What with the weight of the snow, the scurrying of the wolves, and the fire, all combined, the roof threatened to fall in at any moment, and Kit suggested that they had better seek safety outside.

"Outside!" echoed Doc. "Among the wolves?"

"Certainly! We have one chance out there, but here we have none."

"I had rather take the risk of remaining inside."

"No, no, you must not; it would be madness. Quick! don't you see that the roof is even now beginning to give away? Follow me quickly!"

Kit sprang to the fire and seized a torch, then going to the door, taking down his rifle and dashing outside, he threw the blazing firebrand right in among the wolves.

They scattered right and left, fell pell-mell over each other, tumbled helter-skelter here and there, and left a considerable space clear for the hunters and their precious charge.

Doc followed Kit on the instant with Nellie upon his arm, and it was well he did so, for he had hardly gone half a dozen paces from the door when the roof fell in with a crash, and a multitude of sparks fell hissing and sputtering all around them.

The wind quickly caught up the flames again, and as the wolves began to return the ruins of the hut suddenly burst into a bright blaze, which was reflected upon the glistening snow, producing a most weird effect.

The angry brutes retreated, and Kit threw a firebrand into a thicket close at hand, where it soon set fire to the dry brush, which blazed up fiercely.

"Make a circle of fire big enough to allow us plenty of freedom," said Kit, "and we can keep these fiends at bay until morning."

He set the example himself by firing another brush heap, and Doc helped him, both sending in a stray shot or so when the wolves showed signs of approaching some unguarded spot.

The fiery circle was at last completed, and before long it enlarged its limits and destroyed every dry twig, dead tree, or clump of brush that came in its way.

The central fire still burned furiously, and by its light the two hunters were enabled to see all that went on around them, the heat, too, being grateful.

The snarling, snapping pack kept its distance, not daring to approach too near the fire, and thus what had at first seemed to be a

misfortune proved to be the salvation of the little party, for within that charmed circle they were safe from the wolves, not one of them daring to break through the line.

CHAPTER XXVI.

NED LOSES ONE FATHER AND FINDS ANOTHER.

"We are as comfortable here almost as we were in the hut," said Kit, "and a great deal safer."

"The fire seems to be spreading."

"So it is, but nothing but the dry stuff will burn."

"The snow will protect the young shoots?"

"Yes, and provided the whole of Dan's woods are destroyed, that is not of as much account as our lives. The graceless scamp deserves some punishment for his rascality."

The cold was considerably tempered by the fire, and all three found themselves perfectly comfortable, the only fear being that the fire might not last long enough to insure their safety from attack by the wolves.

The latter, seeing that their intended victims were beyond their reach, crept away one by one, only the most ravenous of the lot remaining.

"I haven't got more than half a dozen shots left," remarked Kit, "or I would give these fellows something to eat. The cleaning out of the ranch and subsequent chase and fight made a heavy drain upon my supply."

"I am not much better off, Kit, but as long as the fire holds out I guess we can do the same."

"There are not so many as there were. I guess they were frightened off. Think of the lot of scalps we missed to-night. When there's so many around you there's no chance of saving anything."

"We've thinned 'em out, anyhow, even if we did lose the scalps. I'll bet you are thinking of that rifle that Squire Jones offers."

"To be sure I am."

"And I hope you'll get it, too, for you well deserve it."

There was no particular danger of the woods getting on fire, there being so much snow on the ground and on the trees, though all the dry stuff that protruded was licked up at once by the flames, which made a broad path for themselves and drove the wolves back foot by foot, until they finally gave up the siege as morning dawned and sought their various lairs.

The hut had all burned up, leaving a pile of glowing coals in its place, which every now and then would send up a tongue of flame as the wind fanned it, only to die down again.

The day came on, cold and raw, and the little party began to feel thoroughly chilled and worn out, but as several miles had still to be traversed before they could reach home they set out at once, hoping that the exercise would warm them up.

They had no trouble in passing beyond the fire, when they struck straight for the settlement, Doc and Kit carrying Nellie in their arms over the rough places.

After an hour or so they met a party from the village, consisting of Mark Carringford, Cook, Deane, Harris, Charlie Mertz, and Pat Herlihy, having with them a sled and supplies of food and clothing.

Nellie was put upon the sled, and then all hands set out for the village, Kit relating how Don Allen had met his death, Mark giving the information that both Becky and Ruth had disappeared, that Steve French had been found frozen to death in the wood, and that Mrs. Reynolds, or "the old woman," had gone to live with Mother Vixen.

The meeting between the two girls was very affecting, and Doc did not have a chance to say a word to Susie for fully half an hour, so completely did Kit engross her attention.

Ned was found to have greatly improved, and when Kit told him the whole story of the destruction of the wolf ranch, and the subsequent finding of Nellie, he fairly danced up and down with excitement.

"By Jinks, I'd give a dollar to've been there!" he said. "I'd liked nothin' better'n pepperin' them wolves what that plaguy Don Allen wanted to chuck me to. Confound his old hide, I'd like to——"

"Sh, Ned, the man is dead," said Kit, softly.

"Well, well, that makes it different, and I ain't goin' to say nothin' agin him, but if he'd been alive, I'd just liked to—— Well, seein' he's dead, never mind what."

Ned being well over his hurt, desired to go back to the cave where he had left his father, and persuade him to leave it and live among

the settlers, and Kit, Doc and Mark agreed to accompany him thither.

When they reached the place, they found the entrance open, and walking in, called out to Graham, but received no response.

They called again and again, but all the answer they received was from the wolf, who appeared to be famished and shook his chain savagely.

Lighting torches, they hunted all through the outer cave, but found no trace of the strange man who had made it his home for so long, unknown to anyone.

Then Ned suggested that they go into the smaller cave, but when they reached the door they found it heavily barred.

They shouted and pounded on the door, and then tried to open it, but it appeared to be fastened upon the inside and resisted their efforts.

With the combined strength of all they forced it open and rushed in, a ghastly sight meeting their gaze.

Stretched out upon a couch of furs was the form of the hermit, pale and haggard, life evidently being extinct.

Kit advanced and put his hand on the man's heart, but no answering beat indicated that life remained, but by the glassy look of the eyes, the fallen jaw and the rigid limbs, he knew that the poor man had passed beyond the troubled scenes of this life, and had found rest in another land, brighter and better than this.

Poor Ned gave way to an uncontrollable fit of weeping when he found that his father was dead, and kneeling by his side and clasping the cold hand of the corpse in his own small palms, blamed himself, with many bitter sighs, for not having remained with him instead of leaving him alone.

"Poor old gentleman! Poor Mr. Hermit! Poor pop!" he cried, between his sobs. "What made I go away and leave you? I didn't think as how you'd go and break your heart for me, indeed I didn't, or I wouldn't have stirred a peg!"

Kit and young Mark drew him gently from the place, bidding him not to blame himself for what he could not have prevented, while Doc made a more careful survey of the place.

To his great astonishment he found a small hole in the dead man's right temple, the flesh being blue and discolored, and a few grains of powder scattered about.

Further search revealed a pistol lately discharged, lying under a pile of furs, and upon the stock were burned in the letters R. U. F.

"Rufe Reynolds, as I live!" he exclaimed. "This weapon belongs to him. It is he who has killed this poor old man. How did he get away, the door being secured upon the inside?"

While he was searching for some hidden exit, Mark Carringford, who had not before seen the old hermit, approached and examined the body.

"My God!" he exclaimed, as he gazed upon those calm features, and then he rudely tore away the buckskin hunting shirt, exposing the dead man's breast.

Upon the white skin was the figure of an eagle tattooed in India ink, and on the arms the letters T. G. and an anchor.

"Is it he, indeed?" muttered the man, strangely agitated. "I believed him dead, crazed by the loss of his child."

"What is that?" asked Kit, coming forward, Ned remaining in the outer cavern. "Do you know this man?"

"Know him? He was my elder brother. I have not seen him for years, but knowing the story of his sad life, I believed him dead. Hearing that he had gone West, I came to this region to see if I could learn aught concerning him."

"Then your name is not Carringford?"

"It is and it is not. I was christened Marcus Carringford Graham, but I dropped my last name when I came here, that I might not be known by any of the fiends who had done poor Tom this terrible injury, provided I should meet them."

"As Mark Carringford I would not be known, and my appearance had changed so much that I doubt if Tom himself would have known me. When I first saw Ned, after he saved my infant son, I felt a strange thrill, but attributed it to the emotion consequent on finding my baby returned to me safe and sound."

"Do you know that this man was Ned's father?"

"No! Is it possible?"

"It is, indeed."

"Then I am his uncle! Well, well, the poor lad is not without re-

lations, after all, and I will do everything I can for him, provided he will let me."

"I dare say he will. Ned!"

The boy entered at the summons, and Kit, pointing to Mark, said:

"Ned, this is your uncle, the brother of your father, who is dead."

"Honest Injun?" asked Ned.

"Yes."

"Then I ain't a orphan after all, am I?" he said, taking Mark's hand.

"Not while I live," said Mark, smiling. "I will be a father to you, my boy."

"Well, then, I guess I ain't got much to fret over, anyhow," said Ned, "though I'm awful sorry to lose my pop after only just finding him. 'Tisn't as if I'd allus knowed him, though, and of course his goin' away couldn't be helped. I'm awfully glad I saved your baby now, I really am, for me and him can be brothers, and if anybody goes to hurt him, I'll just punch their heads."

CHAPTER XXVII.

WHAT BECAME OF THE PRIZE RIFLE.

BOTH Kit and Mark smiled at Ned's earnest, though quaintly expressed remark, but a sudden shout from Doc recalled them to the business before them, and they quickly turned toward their companion.

"What's the matter?" asked Kit.

"I have found a way out of the cave. It was hidden, and I did not at first notice it."

The others approached, and saw that Doc had pulled away the hangings of the cave at one corner, disclosing an opening about six feet in height and three in breadth, leading upward at a decided angle.

They all followed this, and found a regular flight of stone or earth steps, which ended in a hollow tree, from which it was but an easy jump to the ground.

"The rascal has escaped," cried Mark, "but let him beware, for I am on his track."

"And so am I," added Kit; "in fact, I fancy that we all want to see him pretty badly, and it would not be healthy for him to stay around these parts any longer."

"What shall we do with the body of this poor hermit?" asked Doc.

"I will take charge of it," replied Mark, "and give it Christian burial. Ned, my boy, you have found your father only to lose him, but you shall never want for anything while I live."

"Nor while I do," added Kit. "I do not forget that to you I owe a warning, which, had I not received, might have cost me my life."

"That was on'y 'cause you took me in when I was 'most froze, and gimme a chance to do somethin', and o' couse I wasn't goin' to hear them fellers talkin' of doing away with yer without tryin' to stop 'em. No, sir, I ain't that kind of a bird."

The party then returned to Kit's, which was nearer than any other house, provided themselves with a sled, and then returned for the body of the hermit, which they carried to Mark's.

The strange story of the recluse, his sorrowful life and tragic death, the relation in which he stood to Mark and Ned, and the confession of Mother Vixen were soon known to everyone in the settlement, and if Rufe Reynolds had appeared at that time, he would have been lynched beyond a doubt.

A kind of informal funeral was held over the body of the hermit, Ned receiving the sympathy of everyone present, and then the remains were put under the ground, the grave being dug by all the friends of Mark and Ned.

The latter then went to live with his uncle, to the great delight of all concerned, particularly the baby, for he seemed to remember the boy who had saved him from the wolves, and took to him at once.

"It beats the Dutch," said Ned, with a laugh. "That baby knows that it's the same Neddy what told him not to cry when he was took out from the wolf den, as well as I know it myself. By Jinks, I couldn't love him any better if he was my own, could I, baby?"

There seemed to be a perfect understanding between the baby and Ned, and Mark and his wife often remarked how much trouble it saved them to have Ned around, not only as far as the baby was concerned, but in many other ways, for Ned was a handy fellow to have around, and never needed to be asked in the doing of a thousand little necessary things.

He did not neglect the woods, with all his other duties and cares, and many a gaunt and savage wolf was picked off by that little rifle of his before Christmas came around.

Becky and Mother Vixen both departed soon after the breaking up of the wolf ranch, and the two giants, Josh and Joe, had to get another housekeeper, choosing one with less temper than Mother Vixen had, her departure affording them considerable relief.

Patson Brown sought out another pasture wherein to perform his ministrations, and the wolf hunters saw no more of him, it being reported that he had gone still further to the westward.

Rufe did not appear before Christmas, and it was well he did not, for if he had, he would certainly have got a bullet, or perhaps a dozen, put into his body, to carry away as a reminder of the esteem in which he was held by the settlers.

As the weather grew colder the wolves increased in ferocity, and one day, a week before Christmas, a grand hunt was organized by Kit and Doc, every man and boy for miles around taking part in it.

The party started from the Springs early in the morning, and divided into two companies, one of which consisted of Kit, Doc, Mark, Ned, Harris, Deane, Cook, Mertz, Herlihy, and twenty more, the other of as many again, all pretty fair men.

Ned, Mark and Charlie Mertz kept together, as did Kit, Doc and Will Harris; Cook, Deane and Pat Herlihy heading a third division, and the way the woods and rocks were scoured had never been matched.

Nothing was to be heard all day and late into the night but the report of firearms, the howling and barking of wolves, the shouts of the hunters and the baying of dogs.

Ned kept Mark and Mertz busy following him up to see that he didn't get into any mischief or undertake a bigger job than he was able to perform, the boy keeping up his end finely in the matter of wolf scalps.

"If Kit was only out of it," he said, as he tore off the scalp of a fierce brute he had just killed, "I believe I'd stand a pretty good chance o' gettin' that rifle. That Josh thought he was goin' to get it. Shucks! he couldn't hit a flock o' barns."

There were many fierce encounters between the hunters and their prey, Doc having a narrow escape once or twice, and being saved only by Kit's rare courage and presence of mind.

Will Harris broke through the ice on the river near an air hole, early in the day, and was barely saved from drowning by Kit, who remembered his own adventures under the ice, and came quickly to his companion's assistance.

Will ran about until he had warmed himself and dried his clothes, and then reciprocated the favor done him by shooting a wolf that was about to spring upon Kit unawares.

It would occupy a volume to relate the many incidents that took place that day, everyone of the party having some thrilling story to tell that night when they returned and partook of a royal supper which had been prepared by the women, and which was set out in a large barn adjoining Doc's house.

Kit and Doc had secured the greatest number of scalps, Mark, Mertz and Ned coming next with an equal number apiece, being followed, with not much difference in the numbers, by Harris, Deane and Cook.

It was a great day, and the wolves had suffered a considerable diminution in their numbers, the hunters being determined to rid the neighborhood of them, and making a very fair showing for one day.

Ned was the king of the feast, no other boy having done half as well as he, although there were several who were considered pretty fair shots, and were by no means lacking in pluck and grit.

The next day there was a match game of lacrosse on the ice, the young men of the place playing that favorite game of the Indians nearly as well as the latter themselves; and here again Kit's side, composed of himself, Doc, Mertz, Ned, Harris, Cook, Deane and others, scored the greatest number of points.

The days fairly flew by until Christmas Eve, and then all hands went down to the residence of Squire Jones to have him determine the fortunate possessor of that silver-mounted rifle.

The scalps, that had already been turned over to and accounted for by him were reckoned up, and then the additional ones were put in by each claimant, the money paid over, and the sum of each man put down opposite his name.

The amounts of Don Allen and the Reynolds family were missing,

for obvious reasons, but the others fairly made up for this deficiency, the pile of scalps that were turned in being something astonishing.

When the list was made out and read, Kit came first, Mark next, then Doc, Mertz, Will Harris, Ned Rowell, Joe Deane and George Cook in the order named.

Kit was therefore awarded the rifle, and was greeted with cheers, which increased to a roar when he placed the beautiful weapon in Ned's hands, and said, with a pleasant smile upon his handsome face:

"Ned, my lad, I will make you a present of this, for if you hadn't done me a good turn, I should never have made as good a score as I have done, and would not have been present now."

"What! mine?" fairly screamed Ned, dancing about with the rifle in his arms.

"Yes, yours, my lad!" and the cheers fairly deafened him.

"But what will Squire Jones say?"

"That he approves of the gift, and trusts you may live long to enjoy its use," said the squire, pleasantly.

"But Uncle Mark? He comes next, and ought to get it."

"I waive my claim, Ned," answered Mark. "If anyone deserves the toy, you do. Keep it, and never make any worse shots than you made at the hunt last week."

"But there's Doc ahead of me, and Charlie Mertz and Will Harris. What'll they say?" continued Ned, fondling the exquisitely finished weapon, and hardly knowing whether he ought to keep it or not.

"I turn my claim over to Charlie," said Doc. "I can't do less, with the example of others before me."

"And I surrender mine to Will Harris," said Mertz.

"Which leaves the thing between me and Ned," said Will, good-naturedly; "and if he isn't satisfied, I'll fight him for it."

"Oh, cheese it!" said Ned, comically; "you're only coddin' me—as if I'd fight! A little runt like me tryin' to lick a fellow as big as a house!"

"Oh, well, if you refuse to fight," said Will, with a laugh, "I suppose I've got to back down and let you have the rifle. Keep it, Ned, and God bless you."

"Then it's mine, after all, is it, boys?" asked Ned, looking all around him.

"Yes," shouted they all, in tones that nearly took the youngster off his feet.

"Then, bully for Kit! Hooray! Give him a holler, boys, that'll take the roof off."

The sound that followed did not, perhaps, do as much as Ned asked, but it showed the high estimation in which Kit was held, and Ned was made as happy as a cricket, and chatted incessantly all the way home, insisting that Mark should invite Kit and Doc to supper, which he did forthwith.

There was not a happier boy in all Minnesota on Christmas Day than Ned Rowell, as he was still called, and the baby heard the whole story a dozen times, laughing and crowing with Ned as if he understood every word of it.

The days passed by on winged feet, and the wolf hunters were kept busy cutting wood, storing ice, fighting wolves, and doing many other things which their life, a combination of farmer and hunter, required of them, and the New Year found everyone in the settlement as busy as bees.

It was in the first week in February, and the cold was increasing, as it does when the days grow longer, Kit being on his way home alone towards night, the sun having already set, and a few flakes of snow beginning to fall.

He had on his skates, and was gliding along the river toward his home, when a figure suddenly sprang from behind a fallen tree and confronted him.

It was Rufe Reynolds!

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A DUEL ON THE ICE—CONCLUSION.

"KIT KING, you and me have got an account to settle," said Rufe, "and now is the time to settle it."

"All right," said Kit, whipping out his revolver, "we'll settle it as soon as you like."

Rufe skated away for a few yards, and then drawing his own weapon, fired one shot at Kit, which passed close to his head.

Night had now fallen and the snow was coming down in great flakes, the wind whirling them hither and thither in clouds, now dashing the

feathery masses in whirling columns high above the tree tops, then showering them back in blinding sheets.

Striking out, and peering through the white veil which hung all around him, Kit looked for the dark figure of his opponent, and catching a momentary glimpse of it, fired.

He dropped upon one knee immediately afterward, and it was well that he did so, for Rufe, guided by the flash of his weapon, sent an answering shot, which passed directly over Kit's head.

Faster and faster fell the snow, and fiercer blew the wind, having a full sweep upon the river, the ice of which was as smooth as glass.

Kit, still kneeling, peered through the whirling clouds of snow, and was about to fire again, when another shot whistled by and struck him in the shoulder.

Rufe had changed his position, and seemed to be skating in a great circle around Kit, who arose and swept over the ice, so as to intercept his antagonist.

He suddenly caught sight of him and fired, an answering shriek telling him that his shot had struck the mark.

He fired again, but Rufe was racing down the stream against the wind before Kit could determine where he was.

He gave chase, Rufe turning to send a shot at him, and thus giving a key to his own position.

The night was dark and cheerless, the blinding storm still continued, the snow now being two or three inches deep, but through the whirling snowflakes glided the two men, pursued and pursuer, exchanging shots, but coming no nearer to each other.

The snow came down as fast as ever, and the wind howled more furiously, but still on and on glided the two men, keeping up this singular duel with but little interruption.

Rufe would turn, and waiting for Kit to come near, would fire upon him, Kit returning his shots with good effect.

Suddenly Kit pushed ahead with great rapidity, Rufe having evidently been badly wounded in the leg, and unable to make very good progress.

Kit swept forward with the speed of the wind, and was reaching forward to catch Rufe by his collar, when the latter suddenly recovered his strength and shot off at right angles.

Kit went spinning ahead, and suddenly feeling the ice trembling under him, realized the treacherous design of the scoundrel, who had sought to lure him to destruction.

He had approached the Springs without knowing it, and the ice was dangerously thin, forming only a slight covering for the rushing waters.

The severe weather had caused the place to freeze over, which it rarely did, but the ice was but a thin sheet, and Kit could feel it trembling beneath him as he swept over it.

He put forth all his efforts, as he knew it would be useless to stop and endeavor to return, trusting to his speed to pass the dangerous place.

One of the sharp blades of his skates did penetrate the ice, and he could hear the rushing waters as they sought their freedom.

Then there was an ominous crack, and he felt himself going down, but springing up he threw himself forward, and put all his strength into that one last supreme effort.

Had the wind been at his back there would have been a better chance for him, but he had to skate against it, and also run the chance of breaking through the thin ice.

A report like a clap of thunder sounded in his ears, and he knew the ice was breaking all around him, felt himself falling, in fact, and plunged forward with the strength of despair.

He caught his foot on the edge of a cake, falling forward upon his face with a force that stunned him.

It was the solid ice he had struck, however, having succeeded in clearing the bad spot by the merest shade.

His feet were in the water, and it was the cold chill of the ice cold stream first bringing him to a sense of his danger.

He drew himself further upon the ice, his head still buzzing with the pain, and gazed around him.

He could hear a mocking laugh upon the other side of the gap, and seizing his revolver, which he fortunately still retained, he fired his last shot in the direction of the sound.

The laugh changed to a shriek, and he heard a heavy fall upon the ice, followed by a muttered curse.

Then he heard the ice crack again, and a splash in the water, with

a bitter curse from the lips of the scoundrel who would have killed him.

He could hear a splashing in the water as if the man were trying to swim against the current, and by straining his eyes he could just catch sight of the man's head, the snow whirling around him, sweeping into his face and eyes, and preventing him from seeing where he was going.

"Curse you!" cried Rufe. "Why the mischief did you fire that last shot? I thought I had done for you."

"You would have been glad to do it, I know, but you missed it."

"Help me out of this."

"I cannot. I haven't my rifle with me, and nothing that I can reach out to you."

"The current is dragging me down. Help me out, for God's sake!"

"I cannot."

"Then jump in and pull me out."

"And risk my own life for your miserable one? No, you must pay the penalty of your crimes. Think of the poor old man you murdered."

"Curse you, I will get out in spite of you!" hissed Rufe, succeeding in getting hold of a larger cake than the rest, and pushing it toward the edge of the gap.

He caught hold of the solid ice, which did not give way under him, and pulled himself out with great difficulty.

Then he struggled to his feet, all wet and dripping, and drawing a long, keen bowie knife from his belt, rushed upon Kit with evil intent.

Our hero eluded him, and glided along the edge of the rushing waters, Rufe trying to follow.

Kit struck off at an oblique angle, and swept by the ruffian, who, bewildered by the storm, and mistaking his bearings, plunged headlong into the chilly waters again, and disappeared from sight.

He must have been swept under the ice, for he was not seen again, and made no sound, and Kit, after looking vainly for him for upwards of half an hour, went up to Doc's house and reported what had happened.

In the morning the two went out upon the ice, and searched up and down for some distance without success until Doc called out suddenly:

"I see something glistening yonder on the ice. Let us go and see what it is."

They skated to the spot, and found a bowie knife sticking deep into the ice around an air hole, the handle tightly grasped by a gloved hand.

The hand was that of Rufe Reynolds, but there was no life in it, and when they drew the body out and laid it upon the ice it had long been dead.

"He probably found this air hole," said Doc, "and tried to pull himself out, but lacking the strength, could only cling despairingly to this slight hold, and thus death overtook him."

"He has met his just fate, but I am thankful that his death is not upon my head."

"And if it was—did he not try to kill you? You would be amply justified."

"I know it, but I am glad it is as it is, for I would not have the death of even such a villain on my head."

The body was taken away and buried in the woods, no one mourning the death of such a man, and there was no one among the settlers who was not in perfect accord with all the rest.

The winter passed away, and before another came around there was a grand double wedding in the village, Kit being married to Susie Whitford and Doc to Nellie King, at which all the neighbors were present.

During the next winter the wolves were not as numerous as before, for a constant warfare was kept up against them in the summer time. More settlers came to the place, new farms were staked out, and the foundations of a very lively town laid down.

In time the bounty upon scalps was reduced considerably, and at the present a wolf is scarcely to be seen within twenty miles of the place, unless one goes deep into the woods.

Kit and Doc are both men of family. Ned Rowell is talking about getting married, and that wonderful baby of Mark's has grown to be a stout boy of Ned's age when the latter first made his acquaintance.

The old landmarks have all gone. Kit lives in a fine brick house, which stands in the midst of a large, well cultivated farm. Doc lives not far away and is the owner of a big sawmill. Charlie Mertz runs a salmon canning establishment. Mark Carrington owns a woolen mill, though Ned—who still keeps that prize rifle—attends to it entirely, and takes his uncle's place in everything; and lastly, there are three churches, one of which is presided over by the Rev. William Harris; a large brick high-school house, the principal of which is Mr. Joseph Deane; an academy, presided over by George Cook, and a brick yard, owned and worked by Pat Herlihy.

The old place has changed, but our old friends still live and talk over the stirring times of years ago, when they fought against the odds of a rough country, privations of all kinds, poverty, hunger and cold, and made their chief living as the WOLF HUNTERS OF MINNESOTA.

[THE END.]

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